Defensive Citizens: Rethinking Political Competence in an Unequal State

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Abstract

What does it mean to be politically competent? I develop a functional account of political competence which consists of a bundle of competencies oriented toward different political problems. I focus on two domains: *monitoring competence*, the capacity to evaluate representatives and participate through formal channels, and *defensive competence*, the capacity to recognize and navigate coercive or discretionary state authority. Using four original surveys in the US and UK, I first show that respondents independently distinguish between monitoring- and defensively oriented forms of politically useful knowledge. Second, I compare monitoring knowledge about political elites and institutions with defensive knowledge, operationalized as factual knowledge relevant to navigating routine police encounters. Group patterns differ sharply across domains: Black respondents score below white respondents on monitoring knowledge but above them on defensive knowledge in both countries, with similar shifts among sexual minorities. Finally, the relative associations shift with the political task. Monitoring knowledge is more closely tied to engagement in representative politics, and defensive knowledge is more closely tied to rights-assertive behavior in encounters with state authority. These findings challenge conventional judgments about who is politically informed and offer a more inclusive account of what it means to be politically competent.

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1 Introduction

What does it mean to be politically competent? Democratic citizenship requires people to navigate multiple relationships with the state. For instance, citizens must form political preferences, evaluate representatives, and make electoral choices. However, they may also need to recognize when state authority exceeds its limits and respond in encounters with coercive or discretionary state institutions. These different political problems place distinct demands on citizens. This raises a basic question: is political competence a general capacity or does it depend on the political problem at hand?

In this paper, I develop a functional account of political competence centered on this question. Rather than treating competence as a single generalized capacity, I argue that it consists of a bundle of competencies that are oriented toward different political problems. One such competence is *monitoring competence*, which focuses on evaluating and understanding representative institutions, and participating through formal political channels. Another is *defensive competence*, which focuses on recognizing the boundaries of government authority and navigating interactions with state coercion or discretion. Political competence, on this account, is functionally differentiated by the political problems citizens must navigate.

These different problems, in turn, require distinct informational resources. Because citizens do not encounter the state in identical ways, they do not face identical incentives to acquire every form of political information. For some citizens, political engagement is most often elective and mediated through representative institutions. This increases the value of information about representative institutions and processes. For individuals more frequently exposed to the state's coercive "second face"—through policing, courts, surveillance, and administrative agencies—information about rights and the boundaries of state authority may carry greater value (Soss and Weaver, 2017; Lerman and Weaver, 2014). This includes knowing when police may detain or search someone, what protections apply during questioning, when an agency's authority may be challenged, and/or how a rights violation can be contested. Unequal relationships to state power thus create different political problems and different incentives to acquire information to navigate them. From this perspective, what people

know—and what they need to know—depends on the face of the state that most frequently and directly shapes their political lives.

This functional account speaks to longstanding debates about the informational requirements of political competence. Political knowledge has occupied a central place in accounts of political competence because informed citizens are thought to be better able to form meaningful preferences, evaluate political alternatives, and hold governments accountable (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Luskin, 1990; Zaller, 1992; Nie et al., 1996; Gilens, 2001). Two lines of scholarship complicate the inference from conventional political knowledge to political competence. One shows that citizens can make competent political judgments with limited factual knowledge by relying on cues, heuristics, and other informational shortcuts (Popkin, 1991; Lupia, 1994; Sniderman et al., 1991; Popkin and Dimock, 1999). A second questions whether canonical political knowledge measures—batteries centered on political elites and institutions—fully characterize what citizens know or what political competence requires. This work shows that canonical batteries can privilege elite-, male-, and white-centered information, overlook group differences in confidence and guessing, and miss the role of lived experience in how citizens understand politics (Hutchings, 2001; Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Dolan, 2011; Barabas et al., 2014; Pérez, 2015; Abrajano, 2015; Fortin-Rittberger, 2020; Prior, 2014; Kraft, 2024; Cramer and Toff, 2017).

Together, these literatures expand how political knowledge and competence are conceptualized and measured. However, they largely hold fixed the political problems against which competence is evaluated: understanding public affairs, making political judgments, and participating in democratic politics. I ask a different question: Why should competence in monitoring representative government define political competence as a whole?

My focus in this paper is on *defensive competence*: the capacity to recognize and navigate coercive or discretionary state authority. This domain of competence is oriented toward limiting harm and understanding when and how to constrain state power. It builds on research showing that highly policed communities develop detailed knowledge of how state coercion and authority operate in practice (Weaver et al., 2019; Cohen and Luttig, 2020). I extend this

insight by treating such knowledge as part of a broader domain of political competence.[1]

This functional account generates expectations about the distribution of monitoring and defensive forms of knowledge. If groups are, on average, differently situated with respect to particular political problems, the relative value of monitoring and defensive knowledge should also vary across groups. Specifically, groups that appear disadvantaged when political competence is measured in terms of elite-institutional knowledge may possess relative expertise in knowledge of state coercion and discretion. Black Americans provide an important case: the racialized organization of policing and criminal legal institutions may create incentives for Black Americans to learn their available protections in encounters with state authority (Soss and Weaver, 2017; Lerman and Weaver, 2014). A similar logic may operate along other axes of state regulation, including sexuality (Andersen, 2006; Canaday, 2009).

The analyses in this paper ask whether political knowledge behaves as this functional account of competence implies. In what follows, I focus on three questions. Do citizens themselves distinguish between functionally different forms of political knowledge? Do group differences in political knowledge domains vary in ways consistent with unequal relationships to state power? And are forms of knowledge differently associated with the political activities they are theorized to support?

I address these questions using four original surveys centered on the United States with an extension to the United Kingdom. First, an open-ended survey shows that respondents independently describe monitoring and defensive forms of politically useful knowledge. Second, I compare monitoring-oriented knowledge about elites and institutions with defensively oriented knowledge of routine police encounters, a tractable and consequential setting in which coercive or discretionary authority operates under relatively well-defined legal constraints. Group differences shift systematically across these domains. The clearest case is the Black–white comparison in the US: Black respondents score below white respondents on monitoring-oriented knowledge but above them on defensively oriented knowledge, with a similar shift among sexual minorities. A similar pattern occurs in the UK for Black and LGBTQ+ respon-

[1]Importantly, defensive competence should not be understood as sufficient for protection from state coercion. I return to this point in Section 2.

dents. Third, the associations shift with the political task. Specifically: monitoring-oriented knowledge more closely aligns with conventional engagement (e.g., voting, efficacy), while defensively oriented knowledge more closely aligns with confidence and behavior in potentially coercive or discretionary state encounters (e.g., asserting one's rights during a police stop).

Together, these findings make a broader claim about political competence and inequality. Persistent racial and gender gaps on canonical knowledge measures have raised concerns about unequal capacity for democratic participation (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Gilens, 2001; Althaus, 2003). The functional account complicates this interpretation of political competence: competence depends on the political problem at hand. Monitoring government is an important democratic task. It is not, however, the only way to encounter political authority if some citizens must also learn to recognize and navigate state coercion. The implication for political competence, then, is that who counts as politically informed and competent depends on which political problems are treated as relevant.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops a functional account of political competence, drawing together research on political knowledge, civic competence, political learning, and state coercion to distinguish between monitoring and defensive competence. Section 3 uses open-ended responses to examine how citizens themselves define politically useful knowledge. Section 4 draws on these insights to translate the two competencies into empirical measures, using canonical and police encounter knowledge as partial informational indicators of monitoring and defensive competence. Section 5 examines the distribution of knowledge across groups, focusing on Black–white differences in the US with extensions to sexual orientation and the UK. Section 6 examines whether the two forms of knowledge are associated with the political actions they are theorized to support. The final section considers the implications for the study of political competence, inequality, and democratic citizenship.

2 A Functional Theory of Political Competence

2.1 Political Competence as a Bundle of Competencies

The study of political competence has long centered on what citizens must know to participate effectively in democratic politics. Classic accounts emphasize political information and sophistication as resources for participating in representative government (Converse, 1964; Luskin, 1990; Zaller, 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Nie et al., 1996). Other work has challenged these demanding informational standards of citizenship, showing that citizens can use cues and heuristics to make competent political judgments (Popkin, 1991; Lupia, 1994; Sniderman et al., 1991; Popkin and Dimock, 1999). These literatures disagree about both (1) how much citizens need to know and (2) about what forms of information can substitute for factual political knowledge. Yet, they largely hold fixed the political problems against which competence is evaluated: tasks like forming preferences, choosing among political alternatives, evaluating representatives, and participating through representative institutions.

A functional perspective starts from a different premise. Citizens confront different problems in their relationships with the state. These problems, in turn, require different capacities. Tasks like evaluating candidates and holding officials accountable require one set of capacities. Recognizing the limits of government authority, asserting legal protections, or responding to state coercion require others. I argue that political competence is therefore better understood as a *bundle of competencies* oriented toward different political problems.

These competencies are defined by the functions they enable citizens to perform. In this paper, I focus on two core domains of political competence: monitoring and defensive competence. What I term *monitoring competence* is oriented toward representation and accountability: evaluating representative institutions and participating through formal political channels. What I term *defensive competence* is oriented toward the navigation of state coercion or discretion: recognizing the boundaries of government power and determining when and how state action may be questioned or contested. These competencies support and underpin different political tasks: monitoring competence is exercised in tasks like evaluating candidates and assessing institutional performance; defensive competence is exercised when

assessing whether state action exceeds legitimate bounds and/or deciding how to respond to state coercion or discretion.

Importantly, I do not argue that monitoring and defensive competence are exhaustive of political competence. Bureaucratic or procedural competence, for example, might involve navigating administrative systems, including welfare eligibility rules and appeals procedures.[2] If monitoring competence is oriented toward representation and accountability and defensive competence toward navigating coercive authority, bureaucratic competence might be oriented toward accessing state resources and navigating administrative requirements. Recognizing these additional domains reinforces the functional framework: political competence is better understood as a bundle of competencies whose relevance depends on the political problems at hand (i.e., than a single generalized capacity).

Figure 1 visualizes this functional account of political competence as a bundle of competencies. This bundle encompasses monitoring and defensive competence (the focus of this paper), alongside additional domains such as bureaucratic competence. Each domain consists of multiple tasks and may draw on different informational and practical resources. The following sections develop monitoring and defensive competence in greater detail.

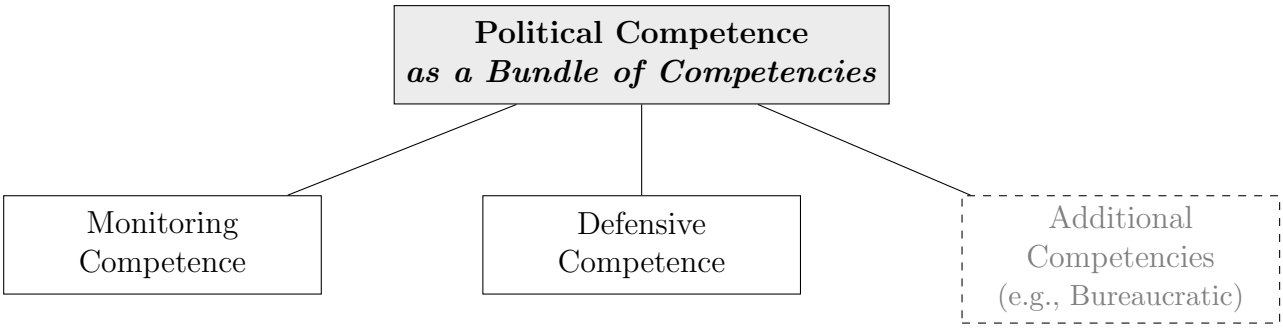


Figure 1: Political competence as a bundle of functionally differentiated competencies.

[2]Along these lines, Stolle and Gidengil (2010) do not distinguish between domains of political competence, but they do move toward what might be understood as bureaucratic competence by examining knowledge of how to access government services (e.g., where to contest a rent increase or where to report discrimination).

2.2 Monitoring Competence

What I term *monitoring competence* is political competence oriented toward representation and accountability within democratic institutions. It encompasses the capacities required to respond through formal political channels. Monitoring competence is therefore salient for political problems that involve influencing government through representation: problems, for instance, like evaluating political actors, making electoral choices, understanding and assessing institutional performance, and holding elected officials accountable.

Research on political knowledge has long emphasized the information relevant to these tasks. Citizens who understand who governs and how institutions operate are presumed better able to perform the political tasks that enable influence within representative institutions (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Nie et al., 1996; Zaller, 1992; Gilens, 2001; Galston, 2001). Canonical political knowledge measures reflect this orientation by assessing factual knowledge about officeholders, parties, electoral rules and processes, and governing institutions (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993). This information is politically consequential because it supports participation through electoral channels. More broadly, it reflects attentiveness to elite discourse and familiarity with political institutions. It is therefore supportive of forms of political sophistication and engagement that matter beyond any single act of participation.

From a functional perspective, these canonical measures of political knowledge are best understood as informational indicators of monitoring competence. This is not a claim that these knowledge measures capture politically unimportant information. Representation and accountability are central democratic tasks, and knowledge about national elites and institutions is a crucial resource for performing them. The limitation, I argue, arises when this domain is treated as an exhaustive indicator of political competence. In line with this point, a substantial literature has questioned whether canonical knowledge measures fully characterize what citizens know or what political competence actually requires. This work develops several critiques of canonical measures by showing, for instance, that canonical batteries can (1) privilege elite-, male-, and white-centered political information, (2) distort estimates because of variation in confidence and guessing, and (3) miss the role of lived experience in how citi-

zens understand politics (Hutchings, 2001; Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Dolan, 2011; Barabas et al., 2014; Pérez, 2015; Abrajano, 2015; Fortin-Rittberger, 2020; Prior, 2014; Kraft, 2024; English, 2026; Cramer and Toff, 2017). The functional account that I develop in this paper raises the related but distinct issue that even a well-designed measure of elite-institutional knowledge captures information relevant to only one kind of political problem: monitoring representative government.

2.3 Defensive Competence

What I term *defensive competence* is a form of political competence oriented toward navigating state coercion or discretion. Where monitoring competence enables citizens to influence government through electoral processes, defensive competence focuses on the capacity to recognize the boundaries of state power and assert available protections in response to government authority. This form of competence becomes consequential in political situations characterized by unequal power and potential coercion or discretion—interactions, for instance, with police, courts, immigration or housing authorities, and other administrative agencies. In these settings, political competence is primarily about recognizing and responding to state power as it is exercised, as opposed to evaluating officeholders and influencing outcomes within representative politics.

This concept of defensive competence, importantly, builds on research showing that people in highly policed communities develop detailed understandings of coercive institutions and the operation of state authority in practice (Weaver et al., 2019; Cohen and Luttig, 2020). I extend this insight by treating the knowledge and capacities required to navigate such authority as part of a broader domain of political competence. This domain of defensive competence is, in my account, functionally unified by the political problem it addresses: recognizing and navigating coercive or discretionary state power.

Defensive competence, importantly, may also shape a distinctive form of political engagement. If monitoring competence supports participation through electoral and representative channels (e.g., voting or contacting elected officials), defensive competence supports engage-

ment directed at the exercise of state authority itself. At the individual level, this may include questioning the basis for state action, invoking available protections, refusing requests when compliance is not legally required, filing a complaint, and/or seeking legal redress. Beyond the individual, defensive competence may also support collective efforts to contest or constrain coercive authority: including but not limited to protest, advocacy, boycotts, and other forms of organized action. What distinguishes defensive engagement, crucially, is its function: navigating or contesting the exercise of state power rather than influencing government through representation.

Finally, and importantly, defensive competence should not be understood as sufficient for protection from state coercion or discretion. In other words, recognizing the boundaries of government authority does not ensure that officials will respect them. Nor does knowing one's rights guarantee the ability to exercise them. Defensive competence may provide resources but cannot guarantee state compliance in contexts in which enforcement is discretionary and the credibility of rights-claimants is unevenly recognized.

2.4 Terminology: Political Competence & Political Knowledge

The distinction between political competence and political knowledge is important for the analyses that follow. I use *monitoring competence* and *defensive competence* to refer to the broader capacities required to navigate their respective political problems. These capacities may draw on knowledge, judgment, situational awareness, practical skill, and confidence, among other resources. I use *monitoring knowledge* and *defensive knowledge* to refer specifically to the informational resources that support and are relevant to those capacities. Because the factual knowledge batteries that I develop in Section 4 do not measure these broader competencies directly, I treat monitoring and defensive knowledge as *indicators* of their corresponding competencies, not as complete measures of them. This approach follows work that distinguishes political knowledge from political competence (Lupia, 2006), while recognizing that political knowledge has largely been used as an empirical indicator of political competence within the discipline (Somin, 1998; Bennett, 1996; Boudreau and Lupia, 2011). Figure 3 in the measure-

ment section (Section 4) visualizes the relationship between the broader competencies, the knowledge domains that are relevant to them, and their specific empirical batteries.

2.5 Political Learning Across Domains of Competence

If different political problems make different forms of information useful, then unequal state relationships should shape what citizens have incentives and opportunities to learn. Citizens for whom representative institutions are especially salient may have greater reason to acquire information about topics like elections, parties, officeholders, and governing institutions. Similarly, then, information about the boundaries of government power may carry greater value when state coercion or discretion is recurrent and consequential. Unequal relationships with the state may therefore produce different distributions of politically relevant knowledge.

It is important to note, here, that such knowledge can be acquired through multiple channels. Political learning may occur through repeated exposure to institutions and the information surrounding them (Pierson, 1993; Campbell, 2003; Mettler, 2005, 2011; Soss, 2000; Soss et al., 2011; Michener, 2018). Knowledge relevant to monitoring competence may develop through formal education, news media, electoral campaigns, political discussion, and sustained attention to electoral and representative politics. Knowledge relevant to defensive competence may, on the other hand, develop through encounters with police, courts, welfare and administrative agencies, among other coercive or discretionary institutions (Soss and Weaver, 2017; Lerman and Weaver, 2014; Weaver et al., 2019; Cohen and Luttig, 2020). People may also engage in this learning from and through family members, friends, community networks, organizations, media, and public discussion.

The functional account that I develop here therefore generates probabilistic rather than deterministic expectations about group differences. Information can be developed beyond direct encounters with a particular institution. As a result, I do not expect groups who are differently situated with respect to state power to possess wholly separate bodies of political knowledge. Nor, crucially, should every member of a group possess the same expertise. Instead, when a political problem is systematically more recurrent or consequential for one

group, knowledge useful for navigating that problem should, on average, be more prevalent within that group. Unequal relationships with the state should therefore produce relative differences in politically relevant knowledge across groups. Before examining these group distributions, however, I first ask whether citizens themselves distinguish between functionally different forms of politically useful knowledge.

3 How Citizens Define Politically Useful Knowledge

I examine this question using an open-ended survey in which respondents were asked: "What kinds of political knowledge are most important for someone like you? Please be as specific as you can." This approach parallels work that examines political knowledge from the bottom up by asking what citizens themselves treat as politically relevant (Cramer and Toff, 2017). I collected the survey on an opt-in online research platform (Prolific) in the United States in winter 2025–26 with racial and LGBTQ+ oversamples ($N = 1{,}167$).[3] I fielded the survey independently from the closed-ended batteries described in Section 4 to ensure that respondents were not cued by the content of those batteries. If anything, the wording of the open-end makes this a conservative setting for observing defensive conceptions: asking explicitly about "political knowledge" may cue conventional understandings of politics centered on elections, institutions, public affairs, and representation.

Four undergraduate research assistants independently classified the open-ended responses using a pre-specified coding procedure. Coders received only responses with no information about respondent characteristics. Each response was coded for the presence of monitoring-oriented conceptions of political knowledge, defensively oriented conceptions of political knowledge, and other or unclear content. Responses received both codes when monitoring and defensive elements were present. I resolved disagreements by reviewing flagged cases.[4]

This coding scheme classified a response as a *monitoring conception of political knowledge* when respondents described political knowledge in terms of following politics, understanding

[3]Appendix 1 presents the demographic breakdowns of all samples. Appendix 13 describes how the study adheres to APSA's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.

[4]The full coding protocol is in Appendix 8. Intercoder agreement was high. Pairwise correlations ranged from 0.72 to 0.91 for monitoring and from 0.74 to 0.94 for defensive coding.

government, and/or staying informed about political events. These responses frequently emphasized knowledge of how government works (e.g., "Knowing how our presidential election system works"), awareness of the stances and actions of political actors (e.g., "Being aware of what Congress and the president are doing" and "Knowing what certain politicians believe in"), and information required for effective participation (e.g., "Knowledge such as politicians' stances on issues so that I can make an informed voting decision").

The coding scheme classified a response as a *defensive conception of political knowledge* when respondents described political knowledge in terms of knowing one's rights, legal protections, the boundaries of state discretion and behavior, and/or how to navigate encounters with government authority. These responses frequently emphasized knowledge of constitutional rights (e.g., "To know all of my rights as a citizen of the United States. Knowing what government officials are allowed and not allowed to be doing"), awareness of rights violations (e.g., "Understanding what 4th amendment rights are and how we can keep them from being violated"), and knowledge needed to protect oneself from government action (e.g., "The most important political knowledge...are my rights, threats to them, and what avenues to maintain them" and "To know about threats to my rights...so we can push back against these threats"). Appendix 9 provides additional examples of both categories.

Table 1 reports the distribution of monitoring and defensive conceptions. Monitoring conceptions appear in 82% of responses, while defensive conceptions appear in 22% of responses. These categories are not mutually exclusive (i.e., responses could receive multiple codes). Approximately 67% of responses contain only monitoring content, 7% contain only defensive content, and 15% contain both. The remaining responses contain other or unclear content (including, importantly, competencies that might represent other domains in Figure 1: such as bureaucratic or procedural competence (knowledge of how to access government benefits, for instance) and local political competence (e.g., knowledge of local ordinances and the behavior of city council officials).

These findings reveal that respondents independently articulate multiple functions of politically useful knowledge. Monitoring conceptions are certainly more prevalent. However,

the coding rules for monitoring conceptions were considerably broader than the factual content captured by canonical political knowledge batteries. Monitoring responses could, for instance, refer to institutional rules or officeholders, policy debates, current events, the actions of political actors, and information that supports electoral choices. That more than one in five respondents include some defensive conception in their answer indicates, I argue, that knowledge relevant to navigating state authority is a meaningful component of how many respondents themselves understand being politically informed.

Table 1: Conceptions of Politically Useful Knowledge

	No	Yes
Monitoring Conception	0.18	0.82
Defensive Conception	0.78	0.22

Note: N=1,167. Proportion of responses with monitoring or defensive conceptions of political knowledge.

To examine whether the two forms of knowledge also correspond to distinct vocabularies in respondents' own language, I next conduct an automated text analysis of responses. I restrict this analysis to responses coded as monitoring or defensive without overlap. I tokenize responses into words and two-word phrases (bigrams) and remove common stop words.[5] Following Monroe et al. (2008), I calculate weighted log-odds scores to identify terms disproportionately associated with each category. For the purposes of presentation, I show the ten highest-scoring terms in each category and rescale their weighted log-odds so that the highest-scoring term equals 1. Bar lengths thus represent relative prominence within each category rather than raw weighted log-odds. Put simply, this analysis aims to assess the coding scheme by showing whether each category (monitoring and defensive) corresponds to distinct vocabularies in respondents' own descriptions.

Figure 2 displays the ten words and bigrams that are most strongly associated with monitoring and defensive conceptions of political knowledge. The results show a clear difference in associated language. Monitoring responses cluster around electoral and institutional politics. At the level of single words, these include *politicians*, *candidates*, *parties*, *president*, and

[5]I exclude "knowing" and "knowledge" because they appear in the prompt and would inflate frequencies.

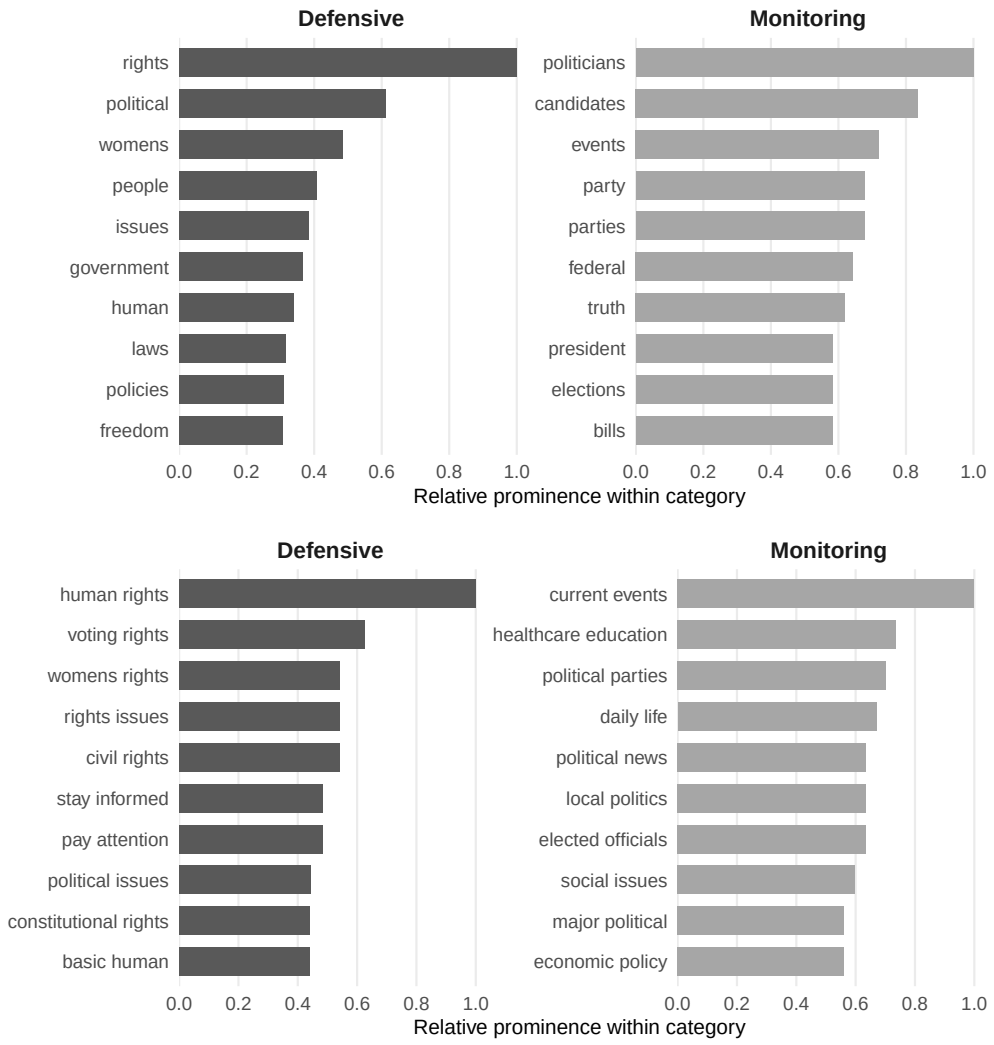


Figure 2: Words and bigrams most associated with monitoring and defensive responses. Bars show weighted log-odds rescaled within categories so that the highest-scoring term equals 1.

elections. The corresponding bigrams include *political parties*, *political news*, *elected officials*, and *current evets*. By contrast, defensive responses emphasize rights and legal protections. Prominent single words include *rights*, *laws*, and *freedom*. Perhaps more informatively, common bigrams are *civil rights*, *voting rights*, *rights issues*, and *human rights*. These patterns parallel the functional account in Section 2: monitoring responses center on information useful for following and engaging in representative politics, while defensive responses center on rights and the boundaries of state authority. This analysis complements and illustrates the theory by showing that respondents' own descriptions of politically useful knowledge reflect this distinction.

Together, this open-ended evidence shows that respondents independently articulate monitoring and defensive conceptions of politically useful knowledge. I argue that this matters for the study of political competence: if politically useful knowledge serves multiple functions, it follows that a measure centered on elite-institutional politics captures only one informational domain relevant to political competence. The next section thus turns to the task of measuring knowledge relevant to the two focal competencies—monitoring and defensive competence—using a canonical political knowledge battery to sample the monitoring domain and a novel police encounter knowledge battery to sample the defensive domain.

4 Measuring Knowledge for Monitoring and Defensive Competence

I next operationalize knowledge relevant to monitoring and defensive competence. Because political knowledge is only one informational resource that may support competence, the batteries that I present below should be read as informational indicators rather than measures of competence itself. Monitoring and defensive competence may also require judgment, confidence, awareness, and the ability to act on what one knows (among other capacities). The measures are therefore designed to capture knowledge relevant to monitoring and defensive competence (i.e., rather than the competencies in their entirety).

I construct two knowledge batteries using original surveys fielded in the United States and United Kingdom. The first is a deliberately conventional measure of political knowledge, which I refer to as the canonical political knowledge battery. This measure is based on established canonical measures in the political knowledge literature and is oriented toward monitoring representative government. The second is a novel measure of *police encounter knowledge*. This measure, which I refer to as the police encounter knowledge battery, captures knowledge relevant to navigating the boundaries of state authority in routine police encounters. The two batteries thus aim to measure parallel empirical knowledge objects: factual knowledge relevant to different political functions. Neither is intended to exhaust the information that may support its corresponding competence. As the open-ended evidence in Section 3 shows, respondents' monitoring-oriented conceptions extend beyond institutional

facts to current events, political news, policy debates, and information about political actors. Defensive conceptions likewise extend more broadly than rights during police encounters across the larger domain of rights, protections, and limits on government authority.

The canonical battery therefore represents the discipline's established operationalization of political knowledge (rather than the full domain of monitoring-oriented knowledge). The police encounter battery similarly samples one tractable domain of defensively oriented knowledge. This design allows the analyses to compare a conventional measure of political knowledge with an analogous factual measure oriented toward a different political function. Figure 3 situates both measures within the broader functional framework. It shows the two focal competencies: monitoring and defensive competence. Below that are the knowledge domains relevant to each competence and the specific batteries analyzed in this paper. The dashed lines and boxes indicate other relevant knowledge that are not captured by these knowledge batteries.

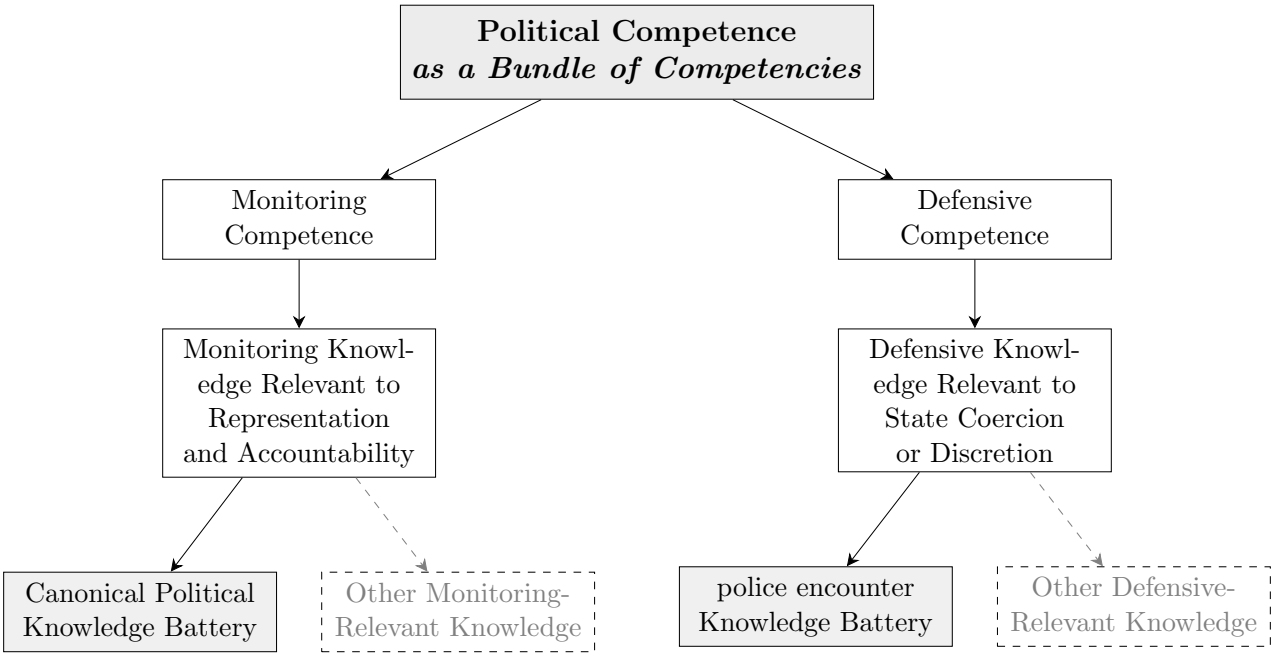


Figure 3: From functional domains of political competence to empirical knowledge measures.

4.1 Knowledge for Monitoring Competence: Canonical Political Knowledge

To measure knowledge relevant to monitoring competence, I use a conventional political knowledge battery based on established measures and item types in the literature on political knowl-

edge. Specifically, I use Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) as the basis for item selection and wording. The United States and United Kingdom batteries each contain questions about party control and ideology, institutional rules, officeholders, and governing procedures. The battery thus reproduces the familiar emphasis of the canonical measures of political knowledge. Table 2 presents the items and correct answers for the United States. For each item, respondents received a correct response, incorrect alternatives, and an "I don't know" option in random order. I coded responses as correct (1) or incorrect (0), summed across the items, and scaled from 0 to 1.[6]

Table 2: Canonical Political Knowledge

United States
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? *2/3*
Which party is considered more conservative at the national level? *Republican Party*
Whose responsibility is judicial review? *Supreme Court*
How long is the term of a US Senator? *Six years*

Note: Correct answers are shown in italics. The UK extension uses country-specific versions. Full question wording and response options for both countries are in Appendix 2.

4.2 Knowledge for Defensive Competence: police encounter Knowledge

To measure knowledge relevant to defensive competence, I develop a novel battery of *police encounter knowledge*. The battery assesses respondents' knowledge of protections and the boundaries of state authority in routine police encounters. This domain reflects the defensive conceptions that emerged in the open-ended responses in Section 3.

In both countries, the battery includes items concerning ordinary encounters with police authority: when police may briefly detain or search an individual, the scope of authority and obligation during a street encounter, procedural protections during questioning, and the legality of recording officers in public. I focus on routine police encounters for several reasons. First, provide a tractable, prevalent, and substantively important setting in which defensively oriented knowledge can be measured comparatively across US and UK contexts.[7] Second, they

[6]The UK extension uses country-specific versions of the canonical political knowledge and police encounter batteries. Full question wording and response options for both countries are in Appendix 2.

[7]Stops, searches, and questioning are among the most common points of state contact (Epp et al., 2014; Ben-Menachem and Morris, 2023).

exhibit core features of defensively oriented political problems (discretion, coercion, power asymmetries, and immediate stakes). Third, these encounters are governed by identifiable legal standards in the US and across the UK jurisdictions. They thus provide a setting in which knowledge of (a) what state officials may do and (b) what individuals are required to do have clear practical relevance.

Importantly, and as discussed above, police encounter knowledge captures only one domain of defensive knowledge. Defensive knowledge may have practical value in interactions with courts, immigration authorities, housing agencies, welfare offices, and any other state institution in which citizens confront coercive or discretionary state power. The police encounter battery aims to sample one tractable domain of defensive knowledge (i.e., rather than exhausting the broader informational resources relevant to defensive competence).

Table 3 presents the police encounter knowledge items and correct answers for the United States. As in the canonical battery, each item includes a correct response, incorrect alternatives, and an "I don't know" option presented in random order.

Table 3: Police Encounter Knowledge

United States
During a routine stop, when are police allowed to briefly detain someone? *When they suspect that the person is involved in a crime*
When may police briefly pat down a person's outer clothing? *When they suspect that the person is armed and dangerous*
At what point during police questioning does your right to have an attorney present begin? *As soon as you are arrested and taken into custody*
In most circumstances, is it legal to record police officers in public? *Yes, if you do not interfere*

Note: Correct answers are shown in italics. The UK extension uses country-specific versions. Full question wording and response options for both countries are in Appendix 2.

4.3 Measurement Properties and Distinctness

Before examining group differences, I first assess whether the two batteries differ in ways or dimensions that could generate cross-domain patterns. Item-level diagnostics in Appendix 4.1 show that the batteries span overlapping ranges of difficulty within each country.[8] "I don't

[8]In the United States, the proportion answering individual canonical items correctly ranged from 0.73 to 0.94. The corresponding proportion for police encounter items was 0.60 to 0.87. In the United Kingdom, the

know" (DK) responses are generally uncommon.[9] On balance, these patterns provide little indication that differences across the canonical and police encounter batteries are driven by differential willingness to answer or by one domain being uniformly more familiar than the other.

Internal consistency should be interpreted in light of the functional construction of the measures (Appendix 4.2). The canonical battery exhibits modest reliability in the US (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.51$; McDonald's $\omega = 0.73$) and UK ($\alpha = 0.48$; $\omega = 0.74$). These reliabilites are consistent with short factual batteries composed of substantively distinct institutional items (Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Mondak, 2001). The police encounter battery exhibits lower internal consistency in the US ($\alpha = 0.22$; $\omega = 0.51$) and somewhat higher consistency in the UK ($\alpha = 0.39$; $\omega = 0.57$). This is not necessarily surprising because the battery samples heterogeneous forms of knowledge linked by the common function of recognizing and navigating the boundaries of state authority. The items are not intended to measure a single underlying knowledge trait (knowledge of search thresholds, for example, need not imply knowledge of protections during questioning or the legality of recording police). Consistent with this functional rather than psychometrically homogeneous construction, Tetrachoric correlations among police encounter items are positive but variable in the UK and weaker and more uneven in the US.

Finally, the two batteries are only modestly correlated. The correlation between canonical and police encounter knowledge is $r = 0.20$ ($\rho = 0.18$) in the US and $r = 0.15$ ($\rho = 0.15$) in the UK. As such, substantial knowledge in one domain does not imply comparable knowledge in the other. This pattern is consistent with the functional account developed in Section 2 and the open-ended patterns in Section 3: knowledge relevant to monitoring representative government and knowledge relevant to navigating coercive state authority represent distinguishable

proportions correctly answered ranged from 0.58 to 0.91 (canonical items) and 0.43 to 0.76 (police encounter). This means that the police encounter battery is not uniformly easier than the canonical battery, and that no item exceeds 0.95 correct.

[9] In the US, the DK rates range from 0.02 to 0.09 and are similar across the canonical and police encounter batteries. In the UK, DK rates range from 0.04 to 0.07 for canonical items, with higher rates for the stop and account (0.20) and recording police (0.17) items in the police encounter battery. See Appendix 4.1 for more detail.

domains of information.

5 Group Knowledge Differences Across Functional Domains

I next ask whether their distribution varies across groups differently situated with respect to state power. The functional account in Section 2 implies that group differences in political knowledge should depend on the political problems that the relevant domain of knowledge is suited to address. If follows that groups differently situated with respect to state power and authority should plausibly face different incentives to acquire different forms of political knowledge. Specifically: groups for whom state coercion or discretion is more recurrent and salient may have stronger incentives to acquire knowledge of rights and the boundaries of government power.

The central empirical expectation for the results in this section is therefore *cross-domain divergence in group knowledge gaps*. Groups that occupy a disadvantaged position on the canonical political knowledge measure may occupy a more favorable relative position when knowledge is oriented toward navigating coercive state authority. The relevant comparison is, importantly, not whether members of a group score higher on police encounter knowledge than on canonical knowledge (the batteries contain different items and are not directly comparable in that sense). Instead, I ask whether the knowledge gap between groups changes when the domain shifts from canonical political knowledge to police encounter knowledge.

This expectation is strongest where the relationship between a social group and the form of state authority captured by the measure is especially clear. As such, I begin with (a) Black–white differences in the United States. Racialized exposure to policing and the criminal legal system makes this an important case for a measure centered on rights during routine police encounters. After this, I examine (b) broader racial and ethnic heterogeneity in the United States, (c) consider sexual orientation as an extension, and (d) turn to the United Kingdom to assess the cross-national scope of these patterns.

The analyses in this section draw on two nationally diverse surveys collected on Prolific

in winter 2025–26.[10] The first sample includes 1,793 American adults and the second includes 1,371 British adults. Both samples include racial and LGBTQ+ oversamples and exclude respondents who failed an attention check (55 in the US and 58 in the UK). The analyses use survey weights constructed from the American Community Survey and the UK Office for National Statistics, in addition to front-end quota sampling, to improve population alignment.[11] I construct the weights using 2024 population estimates of gender, age, race, education, and income in the US and gender, age, ethnicity, and education in the UK.[12] Because of missing data on some weighting dimensions, the resulting analytic samples contain 1,743 respondents in the US and 1,354 in the UK.

5.1 Black–White Differences in the United States

I begin with Black–white differences in the US because this comparison provides a direct test of the functional argument developed in Section 2. First, American policing and criminal legal institutions are strongly racialized. Black Americans, in particular, experience intensive exposure to police surveillance, stops, searches, and other exercises of police authority (Soss and Weaver, 2017; Lerman and Weaver, 2014; Enamorado et al., 2024; Epp et al., 2014). These relationships with the state create recurrent reasons for Black Americans to learn about the boundaries of police authority and their available protections during routine police encounters. Second, a long line of research finds Black–white inequalities on canonical political knowledge measures (Verba et al., 1993; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). The functional account thus generates a cross-domain expectation: the Black–white knowledge gap should shift in a direction favorable to Black respondents when the domain changes from canonical to police encounter knowledge.

I test this expectation by stacking the two knowledge outcomes (canonical and police

[10]Both surveys were fielded outside of national election periods to reduce variation in political knowledge that flows from election season information and updating.

[11]Although Prolific produces higher-quality data and lower rates of inattention than many online panels (Peer et al., 2022; Albert and Smilek, 2023), its samples typically differs from population benchmarks on several dimensions. Weighting brings the sample into much closer alignment with those benchmarks. Appendix 1 presents the demographic composition of both the unweighted and weighted samples.

[12]The Office for National Statistics does not collect income in a comparable form for weighting.

Table 4: Black–White Knowledge Gaps Across Domains

	Knowledge Score
Black	-0.077^{**}
	(0.025)
Police Encounter	-0.160^{***}
	(0.022)
Black × Police Encounter	0.111^{***}
	(0.032)
Constant	0.882^{***}
	(0.010)
Observations	2,822

Note: Pooled survey-weighted OLS model estimated on stacked outcomes (two observations per respondent: canonical and police encounter knowledge). Police encounter = 1 for police encounter knowledge and 0 for canonical political knowledge. The Black coefficient gives the Black–white gap in canonical political knowledge; the interaction term tests whether that gap changes in the police encounter domain. Standard errors in parentheses are design-based and clustered by respondent to account for the stacked structure. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.

encounter) and estimating a survey-weighted model that interacts Black identification with an indicator for police encounter knowledge. Table 4 presents those results.[13] First, Black respondents score lower than white respondents by approximately eight percentage points ($p < 0.01$). Second, the interaction between Black identification and police encounter knowledge is positive and significant ($p < 0.001$). In substantive terms, this interaction term implies that the Black–white knowledge gap shifts by approximately 11 percentage points in favor of Black respondents when the domain changes from canonical to police encounter knowledge.[14]

Figure 4 shows the corresponding model-implied means. Black respondents average approximately 0.81 in canonical political knowledge compared with 0.88 among white respondents. In police encounter knowledge, by contrast, Black respondents average 0.76 compared with 0.72 among white respondents. The important result here is the change in the gap across domains: the familiar Black–white disadvantage in canonical political knowledge does not carry over to knowledge about rights in police encounters. This cross-domain shift is there-

[13]The main text reports pooled models without additional covariates. This is because the argument concerns how knowledge gaps change across domains rather than what predicts knowledge per se. Appendix 6 reports corresponding models adjusting for age, education, income, gender, region, and party identification. The cross-domain shifts in those models are substantively similar.

[14]The Black–white cross-domain shift is substantively similar across constructions of the police encounter knowledge index that exclude individual items (see Appendix 4.3).

fore consistent with the functional account's claim that relative knowledge positions depend on the political problems that the knowledge supports and is suited to address.

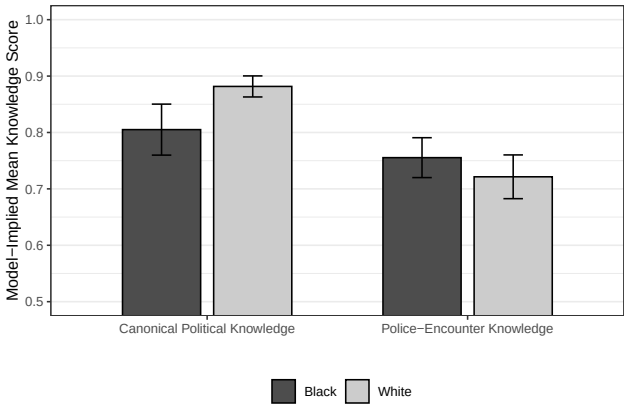


Figure 4: Model-implied knowledge scores by race and domain. 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors.

The US racial pattern beyond the Black–white comparison broadly illustrate the functional argument. These results show that cross-domain reordering is not uniform across racial and ethnic groups. Disaggregated analyses show a substantively similar (albeit less precisely estimated) reversal among Hispanic/Latino respondents. Asian respondents occupy an advantaged position in both knowledge domains.[15] This heterogeneity is informative because it rules out a simple "minority knowledge" interpretation or claim. Instead, it is broadly consistent with the functional account's expectation that cross-domain differences depend on the particular political problems and forms of state authority that are consequential and salient for different groups.

5.2 Sexual Orientation in the United States

I next consider group patterns by sexual orientation as an extension of the functional argument. Sexuality has long structured citizens' relationships with policing, criminalization, courts, and the adjudication of legal rights (Andersen, 2006; Canaday, 2009; Gash and Raiskin, 2018;

[15]See Appendix 7 for full subgroup analyses. Hispanic/Latino respondents move from a 4.9 point disadvantage (relative to white respondents) in canonical political knowledge to a 5.9 point advantage in police encounter knowledge. This represents an approximately 11 point cross-domain shift ($p = 0.067$). Asian respondents score 4.4 points above white respondents in canonical knowledge and 7.6 points above them in police encounter knowledge. Their relative position does not significantly change across domains.

Mogul et al., 2011). These experiences may make knowledge of legal protections and the boundaries of state authority more consequential for sexual minorities. The functional account therefore generates the same comparative expectation as in the racial analysis in Section 5.2: the LGBTQ+–straight knowledge gap should shift in favor of LGBTQ+ respondents when the knowledge domain changes from canonical to police encounter knowledge.

I measure sexual orientation using a self-identification item asking respondents to select the category that best describes their sexual orientation. Response options were straight or heterosexual, LGBTQ+ (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, etc.), or prefer not to say.[16] The resulting sample includes 293 LGBTQ+ respondents and 1,407 straight respondents.

I test the cross-domain expectation using the same stacked survey-weighted specification as above. Table 5 reports the results.[17] In the domain of canonical political knowledge, LGBTQ+ respondents score approximately 2.5 percentage points lower than their straight counterparts (although this difference is not statistically distinguishable from zero). The interaction between LGBTQ+ identification and police encounter knowledge is positive and significant (0.055, $p < 0.05$). Substantively, this means that the LGBTQ+–straight knowledge gap shifts by around 5.5 percentage points in favor of LGBTQ+ respondents when the domain changes from canonical to police encounter knowledge.[18]

Figure 5 displays the model-implied means. LGBTQ+ respondents average approximately 0.84 on canonical political knowledge, compared with 0.87 among straight respondents. In police encounter knowledge, this ordering again reverses: LGBTQ+ respondents average around 0.76 compared with 0.73 among straight respondents. The important result here, as in the racial results, is the change in the gap across domains. Although the differences within each domain are small, the relative group hierarchy shifts significantly when the domain changes from elite institutions to rights during police encounters.

These sexual orientation results therefore extend the central finding beyond race. The

[16]Respondents selecting "prefer not to say" are excluded from this analysis.

[17]Appendix 6 reports models with controls for age, education, income, gender, region, and party identification. The cross-domain shifts are substantively similar.

[18]The LGBTQ+ cross-domain shift is slightly less stable across alternative constructions of the police encounter knowledge index. The estimated shift is positive across all item-exclusion specifications (Appendix 4.3).

Table 5: Sexual Orientation Knowledge Gaps Across Domains

	Knowledge Score
LGBTQ+	−0.025
	(0.020)
Police Encounter	−0.137***
	(0.018)
LGBTQ+ × Police Encounter	0.055*
	(0.027)
Constant	0.869***
	(0.011)
Observations	3,400

Note: Pooled survey-weighted OLS model estimated on stacked outcomes (two observations per respondent: canonical and police encounter knowledge). Police Encounter = 1 for police encounter knowledge and 0 for canonical political knowledge. The LGBTQ+ coefficient gives the LGBTQ+–straight gap in canonical political knowledge. The interaction term tests whether that gap changes in the police encounter domain. Standard errors in parentheses are design-based and clustered by respondent. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$.

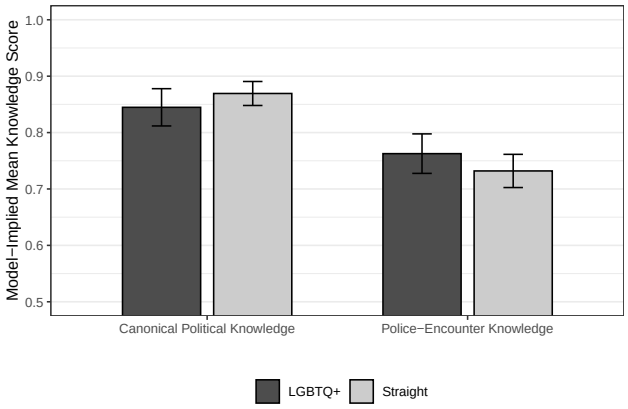


Figure 5: Model-implied knowledge scores by sexual orientation and knowledge domain. 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors.

cross-domain shift is smaller than the Black–white comparison, but it does broadly follow the same pattern. The results in this section are therefore largely consistent with the argument that knowledge gaps depend on the political problems that knowledge is suited to navigate.

5.3 Cross-National Scope: The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom provides a useful extension for the functional argument. Although the institutions and legal rules differ, the underlying political problem is similar. Specifically, (a) citizens must navigate coercive state authority, and (b) exposure to that authority is unequally distributed across social groups. As a result, the relevant comparison is whether relative group positions change across knowledge domains in each country.

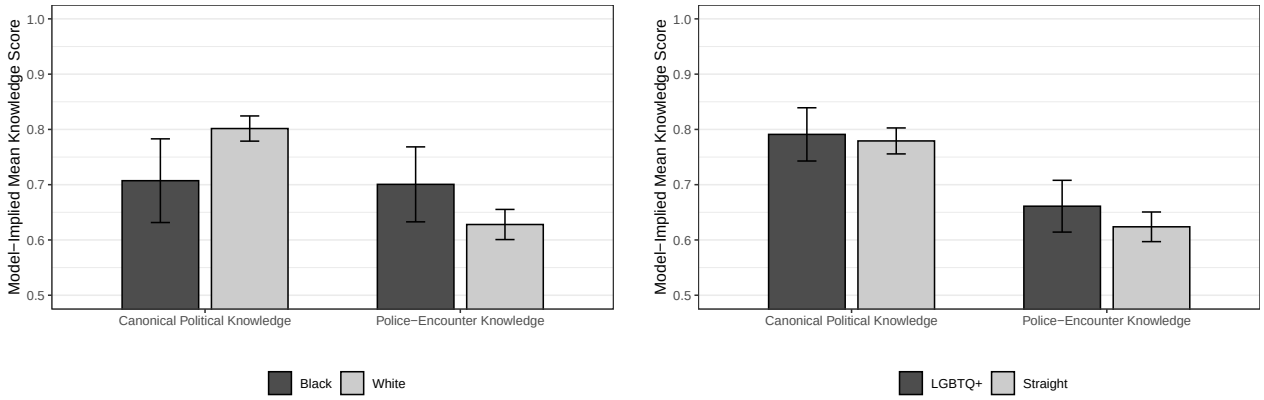
I begin with the Black–white group differences. Black people in the United Kingdom also experience disproportionate exposure to police stops and other forms of coercive state authority (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021; House of Commons Library, 2025). Figure 6a shows a pattern that closely parallels the United States. Black respondents average around 0.71 in canonical political knowledge compared with 0.80 among white respondents. In police encounter knowledge, however, Black respondents average approximately 0.70 compared with 0.63 among white respondents.

The relevant test here is again whether the Black–white gap changes across domains. The stacked survey-weighted model in Appendix 5 estimates a 17 point shift ($p < 0.01$) from a 9 point Black disadvantage in canonical knowledge to a 7 point Black advantage in police encounter knowledge. The result therefore reproduces the central US finding: the relative Black–white ordering depends on the domain of political knowledge.[19]

The UK racial results show heterogeneity similar to the United States. Specifically, the Black–white reversal is not uniform across other racial and ethnic groups.[20] As in the US racial

[19] Appendix 6 reports substantively unchanged covariate-adjusted models for the racial and sexual orientation comparisons.

[20] Among Asian respondents, the gap relative to white respondents shifts from a nearly 13 percentage point disadvantage in canonical knowledge to no difference in police encounter knowledge ($p < 0.05$). Among Mixed respondents, the gap shifts from an 12 point disadvantage in canonical knowledge to a nearly 9 point disadvantage in police encounter knowledge ($p = 0.759$). These estimates should be interpreted cautiously given the relatively small numbers of Black ($N = 136$), Asian ($N = 182$), and Mixed ($N = 58$) respondents. See Appendix 7.



(a) Black–White

(b) LGBTQ+–Straight

Figure 6: Model-implied knowledge scores by group and knowledge domain in the United Kingdom. 95% confidence intervals based on respondent-clustered standard errors.

subgroup analyses, this variation weighs against a generic minority knowledge interpretation.

Sexual orientation provides a second comparison. Figure 6b shows that LGBTQ+ respondents average around 0.79 in canonical knowledge compared with 0.78 among straight respondents, and around 0.66 in police encounter knowledge compared with 0.62 among straight respondents. This shift is directionally similar to the US but smaller: the stacked survey-weighted model in Appendix 5 estimates a 2.5 percentage point shift ($p = 0.496$).

The US evidence reinforces two features of the functional account. First, the clearest result travels: the Black–white ordering reverses across domains in both the US and UK. The sexual orientation comparison also shifts in the same direction in both contexts, although the UK change is smaller and less precise. Second, there is not a uniform reordering across racial groups in either country. This heterogeneity is important and supports a functional account in which different relationships to state authority make different forms of knowledge more or less consequential.[21]

[21]Because there are well-documented gender inequalities in canonical political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Jerit and Barabas, 2017; Wolak and McDevitt, 2011), I report gender comparisons in Appendix 3. In the US, women score around six percentage points lower than men in canonical knowledge ($p < 0.01$), while the gender gap in police encounter knowledge is much smaller and statistically insignificant. The estimated cross-domain shift is positive but not statistically significant ($p = 0.18$). In the UK, by contrast, women score around ten percentage points lower in canonical knowledge and nine percentage points lower in police encounter knowledge (both $p < 0.001$), with essentially no cross-domain shift ($p = 0.58$). As such, the attenuation observed in the US does not generalize to the UK. This reinforces the point that cross-domain reordering is not a uniform feature of group knowledge differences.

5.4 Open-Ended Evidence on Group Differences

The open-ended US survey from Section 3 provides a complementary test of whether group differences vary across functional domains. Appendix 10 compares the prevalence of monitoring and defensive conceptions by race and sexual orientation. The results are illustrative of the broader argument: Black respondents are 12 percentage points less likely than white respondents to articulate monitoring conceptions, but equally likely to articulate defensive conceptions. This cross-domain shift is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). LGBTQ+ and straight respondents are similarly likely to articulate monitoring conceptions, but LGBTQ+ respondents are more likely to articulate defensive conceptions. This again produces a statistically significant 12 percentage point shift across domains ($p < 0.01$). Figure 7 visualizes these comparisons. The Black–white gap narrows almost completely as the domain shifts from monitoring to defensive conceptions, while the LGBTQ+–straight gap moves from near parity in monitoring to a clear LGBTQ+ advantage in defensive conceptions. These patterns thus do not exactly reproduce the closed-ended knowledge results, but they do provide additional and supportive evidence that politically useful knowledge varies by group and domain.

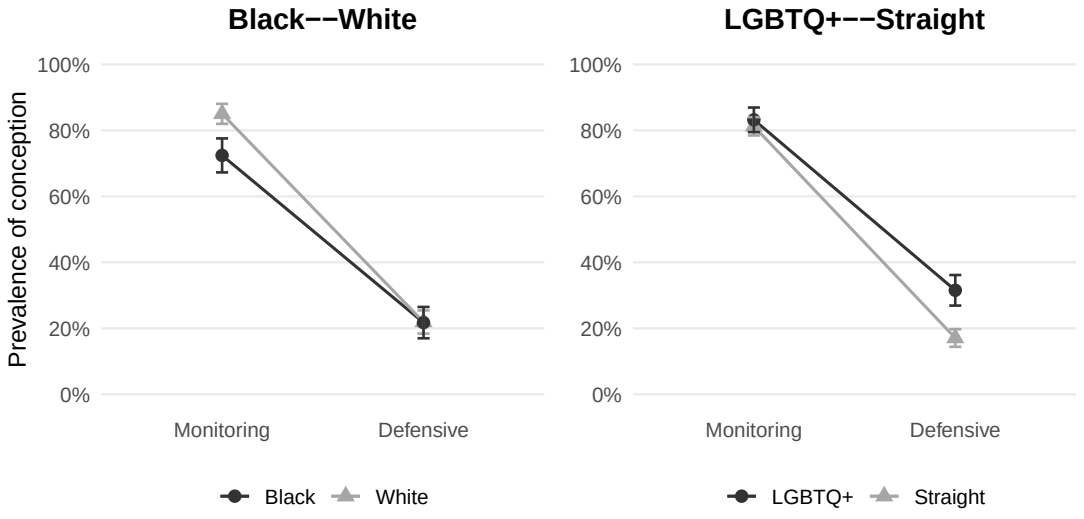


Figure 7: Open-ended conceptions of politically useful knowledge by race and sexual orientation. Points show the proportion of respondents in each group articulating monitoring or defensive conceptions. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

Taken together, then, the US analyses, the UK extension, and US open-ends show that

group hierarchies and differences are not fixed across domains of politically useful knowledge. Rather, group hierarchies change when the political problem shifts from monitoring representative institutions to navigating state coercion. This variation is consistent with the functional account developed in Section 2: what counts as politically consequential knowledge and competence depends in part on the political problems citizens must navigate.

6 Political Knowledge in Practice

The final empirical analysis asks whether the two knowledge domains are associated with the political outcomes they are theorized to support. Both canonical and police encounter knowledge provide informational resources that may be especially useful for particular political tasks. If the functional account is correct, canonical political knowledge should be more strongly associated with participation through formal channels (e.g., voting, following campaigns, and contacting officials), whereas police encounter knowledge should be more strongly associated with engagement with coercive or discretionary state authority (e.g., asserting one's rights during a police stop or responding to a search request).

I examine this implication using a fourth US survey fielded on Prolific in spring 2026. The sample contains 1,837 respondents after excluding 81 respondents who failed an attention check. The survey includes the canonical and police encounter batteries described in Section 4 alongside measures of two sets of political outcomes. The first set of outcomes captures political engagement with representative politics: political efficacy, electoral participation, institutional engagement, and responses to an election vignette. The second captures confidence and behavior in potentially coercive state encounters: rights confidence, rights assertion, and responses to a police-stop vignette. This set of defensive outcomes focus on individual responses to state authority and thus capture one way in which defensive knowledge may matter in practice. Although not measured here, such knowledge could also support more proactive or collective forms of political action, including advocacy, protest, participation in oversight bodies, among other rights-claiming activities.

To measure conventional political engagement, I construct four indices: political efficacy,

electoral participation, institutional engagement, and an election vignette that measures how respondents would seek and use information when evaluating a candidate.[22]

To capture engagement with coercive state authority, I construct three indices centered on police encounters: rights confidence, rights assertion, and a police-stop vignette. These measures capture respondents' perceived ability to use their rights, willingness to assert those rights, and responses to a police encounter.[23] Each index averages its constituent items on a four point scale (on which higher values indicate greater engagement).[24]

Table 6 examines the associations between the knowledge measures and the forms of engagement they are theorized to support.[25] Both knowledge measures are standardized and entered jointly. As such, each coefficient represents the change in outcome associated with a one-standard-deviation increase in knowledge, holding the other knowledge measure constant.

Panel A presents outcomes centered on representative politics. Both canonical and police encounter knowledge are positively associated with political efficacy, electoral participation, institutional engagement, and responses to the election vignette. Across all four outcomes, however, the canonical knowledge coefficient is larger. The difference is most pronounced for electoral participation (0.083 versus 0.046) and institutional engagement (0.113 versus 0.065). This pattern is consistent with canonical political knowledge as an informational resource relevant to following and participating in representative politics.

[22]The efficacy index asks respondents (1) how confident they are in their ability to understand political issues and participate effectively in politics, and (2) how much they feel they can influence what the government does. The participation index averages items measuring intended voting, encouraging others to vote, and seeking information about candidates. The engagement index averages items measuring attention to election news, attention to what elected officials are doing, and willingness to contact a politician or government office. The vignette asks respondents to imagine an election in which they were unsure about a candidate's positions and encountered conflicting news before reporting how likely they would be to seek additional information about the candidate, follow news about the race, or decide without learning more.

[23]The rights confidence index measures perceived ability to recognize and use rights in encounters with police: specifically, knowing when they may remain silent, refuse an officer's request, and how to report police misconduct. The rights assertion index measures willingness to invoke those rights: asking why one has been stopped, filing a complaint after a perceived violation, or complying but challenging the action later. After these questions, respondents additionally completed a police encounter vignette which described an interaction in which an officer asked questions without explaining the reason for the stop. The scenario requires respondents to decide whether to comply, ask questions, or preserve information for later use.

[24]Full item wordings are reported in Appendix 2.

[25]Appendix 11 reports models for each individual item composing the engagement scales. Appendix 12 reports the full model specifications, including coefficients for all covariates.

Table 6: Political Knowledge and Functionally Relevant Action

Panel A. Engagement with Representative Politics				
	Efficacy	Electoral	Institutional	Election Vignette
CPK (std.)	0.087***	0.083***	0.113***	0.059***
	(0.016)	(0.018)	(0.017)	(0.014)
PEK (std.)	0.063***	0.046**	0.065***	0.037**
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.012)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,787	1,787	1,787	1,787
R^2	0.114	0.184	0.154	0.097
Panel B. Engagement with Coercive State Authority				
	Rights Confidence	Rights Assertion	Police Vignette	
CPK (std.)	0.039*	0.011	0.015	
	(0.018)	(0.012)	(0.013)	
PEK (std.)	0.085***	0.030*	0.033**	
	(0.016)	(0.012)	(0.012)	
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Observations	1,787	1,787	1,787	
R^2	0.062	0.032	0.037	

Note: OLS models with HC1 heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. CPK denotes canonical political knowledge and PEK denotes police encounter knowledge; both knowledge measures are standardized and entered jointly. Models control for gender, person-of-color status, LGBTQ+, age, education, income, partisanship, and region. $p < 0.05$; $p < 0.01$; $p < 0.001$.

Panel B turns to outcomes involving coercive state authority. Here the ordering reverses. Police encounter knowledge is positively associated with rights confidence (0.085, $p < 0.001$), rights assertion (0.03, $p < 0.05$), and responses to the police vignette (0.033, $p < 0.01$). Canonical knowledge is associated with rights confidence ($p < 0.05$), but not rights assertion or the police vignette. Moreover, the police encounter coefficient is larger in magnitude for each outcome. The pattern therefore reverses across functional domains: canonical knowledge has the larger coefficient for each form of engagement centered on representative politics, while police encounter knowledge has the larger coefficient for engagement centered on navigating state authority.

On balance, these results are consistent with functional alignment between political knowledge and political action. Canonical knowledge has the larger coefficient across outcomes centered on representation and accountability. Police encounter knowledge has the larger

coefficient across confidence and behavior in encounters with state authority. The distinction is certainly not absolute: both forms of knowledge are associated with some outcomes in the other domain. Rather, the pattern suggests that different knowledge domains support different political tasks. These results suggest that police encounter knowledge is an important tool for understanding how individuals navigate state power in practice. As the behavioral context shifts, so too does the relevant form of competence.

7 Discussion & Conclusion

Political competence depends on the political problems citizens must navigate. Evaluating representatives and holding officials accountable require one set of capacities. Recognizing the limits of government authority and responding to coercive or discretionary state action require others. This article develops a functional account of political competence that is organized around this distinction.

This distinction matters for longstanding debates over citizen competence. One line of scholarship shows that competent political judgment need not require encyclopedic factual knowledge because citizens can use cues and heuristics (Popkin, 1991; Lupia, 1994; Sniderman et al., 1991; Popkin and Dimock, 1999). A second questions whether canonical knowledge measures fully characterize what citizens know or what political competence requires by showing that conventional batteries often privilege particular forms of political information, reflect group differences in confidence and guessing, and overlook how lived experience shapes political knowledge (Mondak and Anderson, 2004; Barabas et al., 2014; Dolan, 2011; Kraft, 2024; Ferrín et al., 2017; Prior, 2014; Abrajano, 2015; Cramer and Toff, 2017).

Together, these lines of inquiry expand how political knowledge and competence are conceptualized and measured. Yet, they largely hold fixed the political problems against which competence is evaluated: understanding public affairs, making political judgments, and participating in democratic politics. The functional account poses a different question: whether political competence should be differentiated by the political problem that citizens must navigate. Even a well-designed measure of monitoring knowledge would fail to capture

competence relevant to other political problems like navigating coercive state authority.

The series of findings that I present here are consistent with this account. First, respondents themselves describe politically useful knowledge in functionally differentiated terms. Most open-ended responses emphasize monitoring representative politics, but more than one in five invoke rights, protections, or limits on government authority. These conceptions are also reflected in distinct vocabularies: monitoring responses center on elections, parties, political actors, and current events, whereas defensive responses center on rights and legal protections.

Second, familiar group differences in political knowledge change across domains. The clearest case in this regard is the Black–white comparison in the United States. Black respondents score below white respondents on a canonical knowledge measure but above them on police encounter knowledge. The same pattern appears for LGBTQ+ respondents. The United Kingdom provides an important cross-national extension: here, the Black–white ordering shifts from a Black disadvantage in canonical knowledge to an advantage in police encounter knowledge, while the sexual orientation comparison shifts in the same direction. Importantly, these patterns are not uniform across racial and ethnic groups, which shows that the functional account does not imply a uniform marginalized group advantage in police encounter knowledge. Rather, it implies that relative knowledge patterns depend on the political problems and forms of state authority that are especially consequential for particular groups.

Third, the survey-based behavioral evidence shows a corresponding pattern. Canonical political knowledge correlates more strongly with outcomes centered on conventional engagement and representative politics, while police encounter knowledge correlates more strongly with outcomes capturing respondents' capacity and willingness to navigate coercive state authority. This pattern is consistent with the functional account: different forms of knowledge matter for different political tasks.

This article has several limitations. First, the police encounter knowledge battery captures only one domain of defensive knowledge, and defensive knowledge is itself only one component of defensive competence. The present battery measures factual knowledge about rights and the boundaries of police authority in routine encounters. It does not, however, cap-

ture the full range of knowledge that may be relevant to navigating coercive or discretionary state power. Even within the context of police encounters, defensive competence may also require judgment, confidence, awareness, skill, and/or the ability to act. Beyond policing, defensive competence may matter in interactions with courts, immigration authorities, housing agencies, welfare offices, and other institutions in which individuals may confront coercion or discretion.

Second, this account does not identify the mechanisms through which different forms of political knowledge and competence are acquired. Defensive knowledge may develop through direct state encounters but also circulate through family, community networks, organizations, media, and public discussion. The survey evidence presented here is consistent with different relationships to state power, but it does not by itself establish the mechanisms that produce those differences. Future research should examine these learning processes and the conditions under which experiences with the state become political information.

Several extensions follow from the framework. Future work could examine whether defensively oriented knowledge and competence support collective as well as individual action. Scholars could also examine defensive competence in settings beyond policing: immigration enforcement, housing courts, welfare administration, probation, and parole. Equally important, monitoring and defensive competence do not exhaust the relevant domains of competence. Bureaucratic competence, for example, may involve the capacities required to access state resources, understand eligibility rules, navigate application processes, or pursue administrative appeals, and may be more developed among groups with greater direct engagement with public programs (e.g., women—especially mothers—racial minorities, and senior citizens). Identifying patterns across other domains of political competence could thus provide a more complete account of political competence.

Finally, the normative implication of this paper is not that monitoring competence is unimportant. Representative government depends on citizens' ability to evaluate and hold accountable their political actors and institutions. The problem arises when information relevant to that task is treated as an exhaustive measure of political competence. The Black–

white results illustrate the stakes: Black respondents appear less politically competent when knowledge is measured through elite and representative institutions but more politically competent when the information domain concerns the boundaries of police authority. What looks like a general hierarchy of political competence with the canonical measure can thus obscure competencies tied to other political problems.

The broader takeaway is therefore about how political competence is conceptualized. Earlier debates ask how much citizens need to know and what kinds of information can support competent political judgment. The functional account adds a new dimension by broadening the set of political problems against which competence is evaluated. Citizens confront different political problems, and those problems call for different capacities and informational resources. Monitoring-oriented competence captures an important part of this landscape but does not define its boundaries. Political competence, then, is not a fixed hierarchy among citizens. Rather, it is a set of capacities whose relevance depends on the political problems—and relationships with state power—that citizens must navigate.

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