The knowledge gap vs. the belief gap
The case of abstinence-only sex education

by

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Knowledge Gaps vs. Belief Gaps

• Knowledge gap hypothesis is that gaps in knowledge of heavily publicized issues among lower and higher educated groups tend to widen over time.

• Belief gap hypothesis is that in a climate of rising partisanship among political elites, gaps in beliefs about heavily publicized, politically contested issues among liberal and conservative groups tend to widen over time, regardless of the educational level of the groups.
Rising political partisanship

Prior, 2008; NES
Scientific Consensus regarding the value of abstinence-only sex education

“Abstinence-only programs are not only ineffective, but (they) may cause harm by providing inadequate and inaccurate information…resulting in participants failure to use safer sex practices once intercourse is initiated.”

“Abstinence-Plus programs [are] more effective than Abstinence Only programs in reducing pregnancy, reducing sexually transmitted disease, and increasing resilience to other risk factors”
Hypotheses

• **H1.** Ideology will be a stronger predictor than education of beliefs about abstinence-only education.

• **H2.** The relationship between ideology and beliefs about abstinence-only sex education will increase over time.

• **H3:** Exposure to Fox News will be positively associated with beliefs about the value of abstinence-only education.
Methods

• 22 national monthly random samples from July, 2005 to May, 2007, n=613.

• Exogenous variables: Exposure to MSNBC (MSNBC), Exposure to CNN (CNN), Exposure to Fox News (Fox), Liberal and Conservative Political Ideology (Political Ideology), Month of Data Collection (Time), Highest Education Attained (Education), Household Income (Income), Age (Age), Ideology and Time Interaction (Ideology x Time Interaction).

• Endogenous Variable: Abstinence Belief.
What predicted Abstinence Belief?

- Political Ideology: (H1)
  - liberal-conservative (+)
- Education (-) (H1)
- Ideology x Time (H2) (Interaction (+))
- Exposure to Fox News (H3) (+)

Chi-Sq (45) = 92.29, p < .001. CMIN/DF = 2.05, Rho = .92, NFI = .95, TLI = .96, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .04, LO90 = .3, HI90 = .05, PCLOSE = .87. Conclusion: good fit.

Standardized Coefficients. Solid line: significant path. Dashed line: non-significant path.
Direct & Indirect Effects on Abstinence Belief

**Standardized Direct Effect**

- Exposure to Fox News: .11
- Ideology (Liberal-Conservative): .24
- Ideology x Time Interaction: .16
- Age: .11
- Education: -.13

**Standardized Indirect Effect**

- Ideology (Liberal-Conservative): .16
Summary/Conclusion

• Ideology is a stronger predictor than education of beliefs about politically contested issues in which the scientific community has come to a consensus.
• Belief gap: over time, the relationship between ideology and beliefs strengthen.
• CNN and MSNBC are not the opposite of Fox News in predicting beliefs about abstinence-only sex ed.
• Political partisanship and associated media fragmentation help contain debates that cross party and ideological lines.