Educational attainment, party identification, and beliefs about the Gulf War: A test of the belief gap hypothesis

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Knowledge gap hypothesis

Belief gap hypothesis
Macro-social conditions relevant to knowledge distribution

- Political polarization is at record levels
  - Party line votes, partisan indices in Congress (Poole & Rosenthal, 2007)
- Causes of polarization?
  - Media fragmentation, selective exposure (Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2011)
  - Income inequality (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006)
  - Media and political consolidation (Hindman, 2011)
  - Culture wars (Hunter, 1991)
  - Authoritarianism (Hetherington, & Weiler, 2009)
Political Polarization: Yougov.com (Larry Bartels, Nov. 2011)

Do you think the middle-class tax burden has increased or decreased since Barack Obama became president?

- Democrats: 45% (increased a lot), 43% (increased a little), 31% (no change), 15% (decreased a little), 5% (decreased a lot)
- Independents: 31% (increased a lot), 31% (increased a little), 23% (no change), 15% (decreased a little), 5% (decreased a lot)
- Republicans: 21% (increased a lot), 21% (increased a little), 31% (no change), 15% (decreased a little), 5% (decreased a lot)
Political Polarization: Yougov.com (Larry Bartels, Nov. 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Independents</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased a lot</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>62%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased a little</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No change</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decreased a little</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased a lot</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Diminishing status of status

Political affiliation, belief systems, are less closely tied to status than in the past

- Party coalition building is increasingly on the basis of ideology rather than status (Levendusky, 2009)
- Ideological differences within faith communities are greater than are differences among faith communities (Hunter, 2006)

Belief statements unite individuals across status groups: educational levels become less predictive of beliefs in alignment with scientific consensus if those beliefs are politically disputed (Hindman, 2009)
Beliefs vs. knowledge

- Beliefs and knowledge are propositions about some aspect of reality
  - Values are more stable orientations than beliefs
  - Beliefs can be modified to fit a political agenda
- Positivistic view: knowledge is independent of the observer, accumulates over time, is irreversible (Tichenor, et. al, 1970)
- Beliefs: stated opinions without corroborating evidence
  - Are particularly responsive to elite cues (Zaller, 1992; Brulle & Jenkins, 2012)
- In a partisan environment, will “knowledge” become “beliefs about knowledge” when one’s preferred political party is associated with a specific belief?
Belief gap hypothesis

Macro-micro linking mechanisms assumed to be operating, but not tested...yet

- Negatively affected constituent groups sow seeds of doubt by challenging the conclusions of non-partisan authoritative groups (Proctor, 1996)
- Political elites frame the controversy in partisan terms that favor their preferred constituents (Pan & Kosicki, 2005)
- Journalistic reporting conventions reinforce the partisan frame
- Media audience members activate partisan sentiments (Price, 1998)
- The individual adopts the position of his preferred party, regardless of prior knowledge, value dispositions, or amount of cognitive processing (Bloom & Weisberg, 2007; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979)
## Previous belief gap findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief in solid evidence for global warming</th>
<th>Partisanship&gt;Education</th>
<th>Partisanship x time interaction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief in abstinence- only sex ed</td>
<td>No*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief in the value of health care reform</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge of contents of health care reform bill</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</table>

* Education statistically significant

* & Education statistically significant but negative
Is it your impression that the US has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al-Qaeda terrorist organization?

Before and after Senate report refuting Bush Administration claims re: Iraq-Al Qaeda connection
Is it your impression that the US has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al-Qaeda terrorist organization?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables in the Equation</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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<td>.001</td>
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<td>.980</td>
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<td>.333</td>
<td>1.109</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.292</td>
<td>1.421</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Extensions of the Belief Gap Hypothesis

• Self vs. expert belief consistency before/after official proclamations
• Addresses the question of whether answers to poll items are contrary to “expert” knowledge
Self vs. expert belief consistency BEFORE official announcement

“Is it your impression that the US has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al-Qaeda terrorist organization?”

Respondent's view: Hussein WAS NOT working w/Al Qaeda
Respondent's view: Hussein WAS working w/ AlQaeda

“On the question of the relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda is it your impression experts mostly agree Iraq was/was not providing substantial support to Al Qaeda”
Self vs. expert belief consistency AFTER official announcement

Perceived expert view: Hussein WAS NOT working w/ Al Qaeda

Perceived expert view: Hussein WAS working w/ Al Qaeda

Oct-04

Mar-06
Summary

• Partisanship 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 partisanship and beliefs strengthen.
• Belief gaps also hold for
  • easily verifiable information (contents of ACA)
  • Information that has been refuted (Iraq-Al Qaeda)
• Partisans think experts agree with them
  • Certainty for opponents precedes refutation
  • Certainty for proponents follows refutation
Future work

Multilevel models linking macro and micro-level belief gap processes
Belief gaps in which Democrat/Liberal beliefs are contrary to the consensus among non-partisan authorities
  • State of the economy
  • Nutritional value of certified organic food
  • Value of childhood inoculations
Belief gaps that do not incite partisan sentiments
  • Loyalty
  • Ethnocentrism
  • Nationalism