The Master’s Tools Can Only Describe the Master’s House:
Hegemonic Epistemologies in U.S. Political Behavior Research

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A previous version of this paper was presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, September 1-4, 2016, Philadelphia, PA. This is a working draft; do not quote or cite without permission of the author. My thanks to those attending the Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration speaker series sponsored by the Institute for Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley, particularly Amy Lerman and Rodney Hero, for their helpful and insightful comments. Of course, any errors that remain are my own.
Abstract

The U.S. political behavior subfield has focused almost exclusively on data derived from white voters. Over the past three decades, more studies have included voters of color. Yet, there has been little discussion of the epistemological biases that remain within the field, including (but not limited to): (1) the normalization of white behavior, resulting in the behavior of voters of color being framed as pathological deviations from that white norm; (2) the application of statistical models that presume independence across social factors, such as race and class, that are deeply interdependent (3) the desire for generalizability, which can be seen as a form normative whiteness; (4) statistical approaches that do not consider contextual effects; and (5) the lack of any significant theorization or operationalization of how power influences behavior. As a solution to these problems, I argue that we need to expand our definition of research “transparency” to move beyond the simple publication of data sets and instead ask that political scientists be transparent about the epistemological assumptions driving the questions they ask and the methods they choose to answer them. We need to have a conversation as a subfield about how we construct models, how we choose to define variables, and what the trade-offs are in terms of our outcomes. We also need to think seriously about how to include power in our analyses. Through this kind of critical conversation, we advance our understanding of the many complex processes driving political behavior within the U.S. political system.

Introduction

Over the past fifty years, research on political behavior in the United States has created a set of understandings and frameworks that are commonly used to explain political engagement (and outcomes) within the U.S. political system. The important roles played by socioeconomic status (SES), party identification, and political interest in explaining voter turnout have become unquestioned truisms that lay at the heart of how political scholarship is structured and how political candidates and their campaign operatives organize their spending and political efforts. Yet, there are some significant gaps in our understanding of what drives individual-level behavior. For instance, even though the U.S. population has become significantly more educated and wealthy over the past thirty years, political participation levels have not risen to as one would expect if SES plays the causal role in driving participation that the literature claims. In 1960, 41.1% of people 25 years or older in the United States had completed high school or college; in 2012 that number more than doubled to 87.6%. Yet, voter turnout decreased from 63.1% in 1960 to 53.6% in 2012. Similarly, the voter turnout models that were created based on largely white respondents do not work as well in explaining participation among African Americans, Latinos, or Asian Americans (see Tate 1993, Dawson 1993, García Bedolla 2005, Wong et al. 2011).

Yet, our field in general has not questioned this apparent contradiction. Part of the problem, I would argue, is a basic assumption, rooted in Robert Dahl’s vision of pluralism, our political system is open and that all trying to access that system are, fundamentally, political equals. For him, a key characteristic of democracy is the “continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” He provides a list of necessary, if not sufficient, ingredients for a true democracy, which include citizens’ unimpaired ability to: (1) formulate their preferences; (2) signify their preferences to the government or fellow citizens through individual or collective action; and (3) to have their preferences weighed equally in the conduct of government, with no discrimination due to the content or source of the preference.
Dahl’s vision of democracy underlies much of how the political behavior field situates the individual relative to the political system within which they are embedded. There have been many critiques of pluralism within the fields of democratic theory (Mouffe 1999), sociology (Skocpol and Evans 1985), and race and politics (Hero 1992, Kim 2000). My purpose here is less to critique pluralism as a theory than to attempt to trace its ontological impact on political behavior as a field. There are two key aspects to this ontology: (1) an ahistorical assumption of near absolute agency/individual rights; (2) an assumption of political and social equality in citizens’ ability to engage government should they believe their interests are at stake. I will discuss each in turn.

Near Absolute Agency

At a fundamental level, Dahl’s pluralism is rooted in an ontological rugged individualism. His focus on political institutions is almost solely in the juridical sense – their willingness to provide citizens with the legal rights to engage politically, particularly the right to vote and/or engage in political contestation. Yet, history clearly shows that legal rights do not automatically translate into the actual ability to exercise those rights. One need only look at the disenfranchisement of African Americans under Jim Crow or the Supreme Court’s unwillingness to interpret the 14th amendment as a guarantee of equal protection to newly freed slaves. Although Dahl would certainly cite those cases as polyarchical limitations on the right to vote, at its core his (and other pluralists’) framing of the individual in relation to political engagement presumes the unfettered ability of the individual to exercise the rights they are granted. Therefore, things like power or structural inequality are not important considerations in the expression of those rights. As I will discuss below, this results in a framing of political behavior as an individual-level act stemming from a person’s interests and/or dispositions rather than as behavior that must be situated within historical time and the deeply unequal distributions of power within American democracy.

Equality of Individual Agency

As Junn and Masuoka (2015: 25) point out, “the notion that there is uniformity in political agency – in one’s ability to participate, to be mobilized by political parties and elites, to consider political alternatives, to seek and consume political information, to form positions on political phenomena” is widely held by public opinion scholars, but “agency at the individual level is constrained by relative group position.” They ably demonstrate that this results in systematic variation in public opinions about a wide variety of topics. This seems a simple and obvious point, but the fact of the matter is that public opinion scholars often interpret group-level differences in public opinion as a reflection of individual identification with an ethnoracial group rather than a product of their structural position (as a group member) within U.S. society. As Hancock (2016: 33) points out, “relational power structures lived experiences, the shape of social locations within which people function and interact, and the discursive norms that shape how they understand and interpret the stimuli they encounter.” Therefore, an approach to public opinion that does not address the role of relational power structures remains, by definition, incomplete.

Equality of Access

Similarly, pluralism assumes that government institutions are open to all and that each person’s voice will be heard within them. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that congressional representatives, at a minimum, are much more responsive to their most affluent constituents (Gilens 2012). But looking historically at different groups within the United States, it is clear that equal access to governmental
institutions has never been the norm, even among U.S. citizens. One only need to consider women’s exclusion from the franchise or the ability to engage in party politics (Gardner 2005). Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens since the Jones Act was passed but still do not have equal access to the U.S. House of Representatives, given their representative has a seat but no vote in the body. Puerto Ricans who live on the island have no voice at all in the U.S. Senate. This is also true of all residents of Washington, D.C. Beyond these formal exclusions, history also shows us that Mexicans (Gutiérrez 1995, Deverell 2004), African Americans after emancipation (McAdams 1982, Dawson 2001, Alexander 2010) had limited citizenship rights, particularly in relationship to the criminal justice system. The idea that everyone’s ability to have voice within our legislative institutions flies in the face of U.S. history.

It follows logically that, if different groups’ relationship to democratic institutions varies that their patterns of engagement will likely vary as well. The source of the difference is therefore structures of exclusion rather than individual-level predispositions or preferences. Yet, the role that these differences in power and access play in American politics is rarely considered within U.S. political behavior research. Instead scholarship is dominated by what I call colorblind pluralism — a pluralist view of the U.S. political system that sees factors that affect a person’s structural position in the United States, such as race, as irrelevant to the workings of politics and/or political engagement.

**Historical Foundations**

Considering the origins of political science as a discipline, this ontological “willful blindness” regarding race and its political effects on those racialized is not so surprising. The founding of political science as a discipline coincided with the Eugenics movement and the establishment of the United States as a colonial power. Those founding the field did not imagine that marginalized communities (Native Americans, African Americans, women, and/or other minority groups) would remain within U.S. democracy, given they were “[b]arbaric races” that would be “swept aside” in the face of “natural” progress. Or, they would be expected not to matter much to democratic practice since they were officially or practically disenfranchised and therefore unlikely to have any significant influence on political outcomes. This history is important because it demarcates the ontological assumptions that underlie much of the political behavior field — that structural racism, expressed through racial differences in political practice, is not a salient or important area of political research in the United States. Those ontological assumptions, and the hegemonic epistemological orientations they led to, remain embedded in how political behavior is studied within the U.S. context. The result is that, despite increasing statistical and/or methodological sophistication, at the most basic levels scholars’ models cannot illuminate phenomena that, at their core, those models were not designed to “see”.

I will develop this argument by discussing the history of the behavioral turn in political science and then elaborating five major points: (1) the normalization of white behavior, resulting in the behavior of voters of color (once integrated into later studies) being framed as pathological deviations from that white norm, with no discussion of the power and privilege inherent in that norm; (2) the use of an individual level of analysis that precludes consideration of group-level and/or contextual effects; (3) the application of statistical models that presume independence across social factors, such as race and class, that are deeply dependent on one another; (4) the desire for generalizability, which can be seen as another form normative whiteness focusing attention on the center of the normal curve, where we find results for the majority population, and framing behavior in the “tails” as deviant from the white majority norm; (5) the lack of any significant theorization or operationalization of how power influences behavior, rendering invisible the role that stigma and inequality play in behavioral outcomes.
This analysis should not be taken as an argument against the study of political behavior, nor of the use of quantitative or “scientifically-oriented” methodologies within political science. Rather, it is a call for all political scientists, regardless of their methodological orientations, to take more seriously and be more transparent about the epistemological assumptions they bring to their work in order to be more aware of the many “blind spots” that exist in their research efforts. We are all human and by definition flawed. Given that, it is impossible that our collective research enterprise is not similarly flawed. Only by being transparent about our biases can we ensure the value of our research and get closer to shedding light on the “truth,” understanding that the actual “truth” will always lie outside our reach given the limitations of our cognition, lexicons, and research tools.

In order to ensure that the reader understands what I mean by “political behavior research,” here is the definition of political behavior provided in the 2001 *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*:

Behavioralism is a current or approach within the discipline of political science. It may be described as theory-led empiricism which aims at the establishment of laws, using as its epistemological model the methodology of the natural sciences. Its goal is the description, explanation, and prediction of political processes based on quantifiable data. Despite initial bitter resistance, behavioralism infiltrated most of the major American political science departments during the 1950s. From the early 1960s, it significantly molded the character of American political science for the next 15 to 20 years. Since then, there have been hardly any self-declared behavioralists, but the spirit of empiricism and methodical professionalism has shaped the discipline of political science within and outside of the United States to this day.

Within the context of this article, my definition of epistemology is broader than that used above, where epistemology often is defined as simply positivism versus non-positivism. For the purposes of this article, I define epistemology as a researcher’s worldview, including assumptions about what knowledges have value (which encompasses the positivist/non-positivist debate) but also about how power operates through societal structures and how those structures influence the opportunity structures (and therefore opportunities for political engagement) available to particular individuals within the U.S. polity. A hegemonic epistemology is one that is so dominant scholars do not see the need to state or question its validity and/or orientations.

Within the context of my epistemological orientation, it is that attention to the role that structure plays in setting the stage (differentially) for political engagement along the racial, gender, and class lines that I contend is missing from current hegemonic epistemological framings. At its core, U.S. political behavior research has been much more interested in micro-level explanations and analyses than macro-level ones, for historical and ideological reasons.

Again, given the history of the discipline, this should not be so surprising. Charles Merriam, long-time political science professor at the University of Chicago, is often acknowledged as the founder of “scientific” political science. Like many progressives, he believed in the ability of the newly minted social sciences to address the important problems of the day and thus spent much of his career ensuring that political research and social policy recommendations be rooted in a positivist epistemological approaches. Also like many progressives, Merriam was a strong supporter of the eugenics movement, believing that the United States, as one of the “Teutonic” nations, had an obligation to foster freedom and democracy around the world. But he did not believe that all the racial groups in the United States were capable of democratic citizenship. Below I quote an excerpt from
chapter 7 of A History of American Political Theories, which was published in 1903 and highly influential in laying out the growing consensus underlying this “new” political science. I believe it is worth quoting him at length, rather than cherry picking sentences, so that the reader may get a sense of the particular worldview he saw as the core of the discipline (the emphases are mine).

In the opening of the chapter, he talks about the development of a new political theory that is more “systematic” and “scientific” than what came before. For Merriam, this new discipline’s core thinkers are Francis Lieber, Theodore Woolsey, and John W. Burgess. Key to their “method” is their “more scientific way of approaching the questions of politics” (p. 306). He then discusses how their thinking differs from what came before. In reference to the concept of “liberty,” he lays out:

Liberty, moreover, is not a right equally enjoyed by all. It is dependent upon the degree of civilization reached by the given people, and increases as this advances. The idea that liberty is a natural right is abandoned [by the new political science as explained by Burgess], and the inseparable connection between political liberty and political capacity is strongly emphasized. After an examination of the principle of nationality, and the characteristic qualities of various nations or races, the conclusion is drawn that the Teutonic nations are particularly endowed with political capacity. Their mission in the world is the political civilization of mankind.

From this as a premise are deduced further conclusions of the utmost importance. The first of these is that in a state composed of several nationalities, the Teutonic element should never surrender the balance of power to the others. Another is that the Teutonic race can never regard the exercise of political power as a right of man, but it must always be their policy to condition the exercise of political rights on the possession of political capacity. A final conclusion is that the Teutonic races must civilize the politically uncivilized. They must have a colonial policy. Barbaric races, if incapable, may be swept away; and such action “violates no rights of these populations which are not petty and trifling in comparison with its transcendent right and duty to establish political and legal order everywhere.” On the same principle, interference with the affairs of states not wholly barbaric, but nevertheless incapable of effecting political organization for themselves, is fully justified. Jurisdiction may be assumed over such a state, and political civilization worked out for those who are unable to accomplish this unaided. This propaganda of political civilization, it is asserted, is not only the right and privilege, but the mission and duty, the very highest obligation incumbent on the Teutonic races, including the United States. Such action is not unwarrantable or unjustifiable interference with the affairs of those who should rightly be left unmolested, but is the performance of the part marked out for the Teutonic nations in the world’s development.

I am not arguing that scholars currently studying political behavior believe in eugenics and the superiority of the Teutonic races. But, we need to remember that the rise of statistics coincided with and was supported by the Eugenics movement (Zuberi 2001). Given Eugenicists’ focus on the white race, the lack of a need to “see” non-white populations within the construction of the research design remained in practice. I would argue that, after World War II, the field moved from an acceptance of the existing racial order as “natural” to a blindness to its structural impact. The ontological roots may be different, but the epistemological and empirical outcomes are the same. Because, during that time, there has been no significant questioning of the value and/or usefulness of those tools within the context of studying structural racism, the biases imputed by the founders remained, and became hegemonic through continued practice.
Most political scientists would agree that the book that most clearly launched the current approach to the study of voting behavior was *The American Voter*, published in 1960, which launched the American National Election Studies (ANES), arguably the most influential source of data on American politics since that time. In *The American Voter*, Campbell et al. delineated a socio-psychological model for explaining American voting behavior, one that focused on individual-level factors, such as education, income, feelings of political efficacy, interest in politics, et cetera, to explain voting behavior.

Very little of the text in *The American Voter* is dedicated to considering Black voting behavior. What is in the text, however, is instructive. When discussing “persistent non-voting among Negroes,” Campbell et al. compare white and Black rates of non-voting in southern states with restrictive voting laws. They find that levels of Black non-voting are higher than those of whites even in states with less restrictive voting laws. They discuss the impact that county racial composition has on Black voting rates, asserting that it is the proportion of the Black population in the county, rather than state voting legislation, that explains much of the difference in Black and white turnout in the south. Even though they find “very sharp differences” between white and Black voting patterns in the south, they conclude that the pattern is “a reflection of a system of one-party politics” rather than any racial impact per se. Thus, they conclude that “the greater impact of restrictive electoral laws on Negros is, in part at least, a function of the relatively low motivational levels among Negros [to vote].” In other words, the effect of legal restrictions on voting “depends on the degree to which the individual voter is motivated to vote. If his motivation is high, formal facilitation or inhibition of this behavior is relatively ineffective.”

It is important to place this discussion in context. *The American Voter* is partly based upon data from the 1956 presidential election, an election that occurred two years after the historic ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, during a time of violent white resistance to integration across the south. Campbell and his co-authors do make vague reference to “informal, extralegal barriers” to Black political participation (a mild euphemism in the face of what was actually happening in the south) but still return to a view of individual voters having absolute individual agency – the idea that their ability to vote is mostly a product of their personal motivations, rather than institutional or extra-legal barriers. Given the history of violence and organized resistance against Black citizens exercising their voting rights – resistance that persists to the present day – it is difficult to see how this ontological orientation is in any way aligned with the facts of U.S. political history.

The other dominant orientation towards understanding the role of race in U.S. politics is also present in *The American Voter*; the idea of race having meaning in political engagement as an identity category rather than as a marker of an individual’s structural position. In their chapter looking at the impact of membership in social groupings, Campbell et al. find that Blacks are the most cohesive group they studied, with Blacks being “almost unanimous in their belief that the group has a right to further its ends by political activity.” They go on to explain that Black support for the Democratic Party decreased sharply between the 1952 and 1956 elections, and sees this as a sign of “fragmentation” among Blacks.

This idea that identification with a particular racial group will result in a particular (and uniform) set of behaviors or vote choice is based on an essentialist understanding of what group membership means. Being “Black” in U.S. society means having a particular set of social, economic, and political opportunity structures. It means being a product of a particular history that affects Blacks’ (and other ethnoracial groups’) interpretation of current events. That life experience can result in very different reactions to
the same set of events; that does not mean that “Blackness,” or more importantly occupying a particular structural position within U.S. society, does not have a meaningful impact on that individual’s interpretation of those events. If Black respondents think and behave differently, that does not mean that “race” is not a critical organizing structure within U.S. society. As Zuberi (2001) argues “[r]acial identity is about shared social status, not shared individual characteristics.” The reduction of “racial effects” to the impact that racial identification has on political behavior, as is the norm in much of the literature, is at best superficial and at worst misleading about the complex and multi-layered role that race plays in U.S. politics.

**The Present Day: Issues of Interpretation and Analysis**

This history is important because the ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded in these foundational texts have been repeated (and largely unquestioned) within political behavior research over the past half century. Recently, political scientists have focused almost exclusively on their ability to make causal claims, without any real discussion of the fact that connecting any social variables, quantitative or qualitative, to individual-level behavior requires a causal theory – an area of analysis that has received scant focus but is critical to a scholar’s interpretation of the facts [Need to list REP examples of a different way of doing this]. Norms of peer review and the hostility to articles or books that operationalize models differently, combined with professional exigencies to publish and in top ranked journals, make it difficult for scholars who focus on race to deviate from these established norms.

**People of Color as Deviations from the White (male) Norm**

The foundation of the political behavior field was formed by the data provided by the American National Election Studies (ANES), which have been conducted in every presidential election since 1948. As Figure 1 shows, from 1948 to 2016, 80.8% of total ANES respondents were white. It was not until 1984 that the ANES included an oversample of black voters. Thus far, the ANES has only included a black over sample three times in its history: 1984, 2008 and 2012.
In a literal erasure, scholars using the ANES during these years would remove the responses from the Black oversample because they had a negative impact on the standard errors. ANES users have raised concerns about using the recent Black and Latino oversamples because they interfere with general population inference. Therefore, the models and theories that have been developed using this data are based on largely white samples, making the “norm” in political behavior research a white norm. The idea that meaningful inferences about the American population can be made without including any non-white respondents demonstrates how generalizability is, at its core, the epistemological embodiment of normative whiteness.

When the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) and other surveys were conducted that included significant samples of non-white respondents, were conducted, race has most often been operationalized as a dummy variable, with white as the comparison category. The same is true for gender; female is almost always coded as “1,” with males as the excluded category. In that formulation, the interpretation of the coefficient is literally the degree to which it denotes movement away from the “norm” that is white and male (Junn and Masuoka 2015). For particular research questions, it may make sense to code the variables and conduct the analysis in this way. But I have never seen any discussion in any paper (other than Junn and Masuoka’s critique of this practice) justifying this coding on theoretical or empirical grounds.

From a practical perspective, what this practice does is normalize white male behavior and, by extension, pathologize the behavior of people of color and women as deviations from an established, unquestioned norm. Similarly, most scholars run their models as fixed affects – assuming a universal intercept – rather than random effects, which allows observations to have different starting points. Although this often does not make a substantive difference in the analysis, random effects more accurately align with what we know to be the case in the real world. At a minimum, our coding practices and determination of the excluded categories should flow from our research question(s) and theoretical frameworks rather than simply established practice.

The secondary problem that arises from this operationalization practice is that whites always remain “unraced.” “Race” is only studied through a racialized dummy variable, which means that the excluded category is not “raced.” At a minimum, the result is that we do not tend to study the impact of whiteness on white on political behavior. Yet, whiteness studies has made clear that the white racial category is a racialized category that has had long term effects on U.S. history, politics, and public policy (Ignatiev 1995, Jacobson 1998, Leonardo 2002). We saw in the 2016 presidential election how a perceived loss of power among whites affected their support of President Trump. Because the bulk of political theorizing has been based on white samples, without any meaningful consideration of how being white – holding a position of power and privilege in U.S. society – affects the trends we observed, there has been almost no theorizing of the impact of whiteness itself within the mainstream political behavior literature. The 2016 presidential election demonstrated how a perceived loss of power among whites (and modern sexism) affected white (male) support of President Trump (Genforward Survey 2017). The lack of focus on this area has left us unable to speak in a theoretically informed way about how the theories we take for granted regarding the role of resources, political interest, and party identification play in political engagement actually are products of that power and privilege, rather than any axiomatic rules about how all individuals engage within U.S. politics. The universal subject that is at the core of these analyses is a white subject.
Another critical assumption embedded in our research practices is how we conceptualize the ontology of categories and their subsequent relationships to one another. When we make statistical inferences based on the impact of a set of independent variables on a dependent variable, the models almost always assume that those independent variables are independent and identically distributed (IID). In other words, for the inferences to be accurate and to satisfy the conditions of the central limit theorem, each random variable must have the same probability distribution as the others and all must be mutually independent. This is what Emirbayer (1997) calls the “billiard ball effect” – the assumption that independent variables within a regression model, such as dummies for race and gender, literally bounce off of each other like billiard balls rather than being deeply interdependent.

But given how we know social factors such as race, gender, and class are interrelated with one another, this is an instance where standard methodological practice does not align with what our theories tell us about the nature of these categories (Zuberi and Bonilla Silva 2008). This is a place where our statistical model specifications would benefit from insights from intersectionality theory. The importance of intersectionality is that it calls into question established assumptions about the relationships among social categories (Hancock 2015). At the most basic level, intersectionality theory teaches us that positionalities such as race and gender are mutually constitutive. This means that their impacts cannot be disentangled or separated out from one another. As Hancock (2015: 39) points out, intersectionality theory expands “the notion of social location to include both situations where analytically distinct sources of bias or discrimination cannot be determined (e.g., is one experiencing discrimination due to one’s disability, gender, or race?).” In other words, a woman of color experiences her gender in a way that is equally informed by her ethnoracial group status. The impacts of her structural position across multiple dimensions of marginalization and privilege cannot be separated into separate pieces; they are one.

Even if theorists do not agree with an intersectional frame, it is difficult to argue empirically, within the U.S. context, that factors such as race and class are completely independent from one another. Decades of data on income and educational inequality by racial group status shows the strong correlation across these two factors. How is it that so many of our models can be based on assumptions about the ontology of categories that so clearly violate our understandings of how these positionalities operate within U.S. society? It is difficult to argue that race and gender do not influence an individual's likely income, educational levels, partisanship, etc. Similar to the assumptions about equality in individual agency, discussed above, our accepted practices in model specification assume that socioeconomic status (among other things) is somehow independent of racial or gender status. That ontological vision of the relationship across relevant categories is simply empirically inaccurate. Its ongoing continuation ensures that the estimates and conclusions resulting from that operationalization will also be flawed.

There is also the issue of interpretation. As Zuberi (2001) argues, “Data do not tell us a story. We use data to craft a story that comports with our understanding of the world ... [p]articular statistical methods’ applicability to social problems is determined by the users of social statistics.” (p.7). Accepted practices, like the model specification practices discussed above, have no roots in statistics, but rather through consensus-making among practitioners within a particular discipline (p.8). Connecting those variables to the real world requires a causal theory, one that scholars rarely make visible (p. 9). For example, if a race dummy is found to be significant, what does that mean? (Zuberi and Bonilla Silva
2008). Quantitative data can tell you the what but not the why. Yet quantitative social scientists often make claims about the world based on statistical findings that go well beyond what the data can actually “say.” In this regard, interpretation is as important as the model specification.

These biases are also embedded within much experimental research as well. For most experimental scholars, the core epistemological assumption that the ascriptive characteristics of voters are not a meaningful category of difference remains. That is why these studies focus almost exclusively on the intervention and exclude covariates because causal inference is seen as requiring the assumption of a universal subject. These epistemological assumptions mean that voters’ receptivity to treatment should not be influenced by social position or historical context. Despite the long history of racial exclusion and bias within U.S. history, the influence of race on political behavior for many of these scholars remains an open empirical question. As Green et al (2013: 39) assert,

Another topic on the frontier of experimental research is the causal influence of individual voter attributes. The non-experimental literature on voter turnout is replete with claims about the causal effects of attributes such as age, race or gender. There are good reasons to be skeptical of these causal inferences, but what are the experimental alternatives? It is hard to imagine how one would go about altering physical attributes, but researchers can take advantage of “Mendelian” random assignment that causes siblings to take on different attributes.

Given all the evidence to the contrary, that skepticism can only be seen as an ontological willful blindness, which then drives epistemological and methodological choices.

Generalizability as Normative Whiteness

Related to the problems with political behavior scholars’ ontology of categories is their inability to include context within their studies in meaningful ways. As Sarah Igo (2008) points out in The Averaged American, at the turn of the twentieth century, social science was concerned with studying “deviance.” Sociologists like those of the Chicago school studied tenements and slums in order to understand immigrants and other marginalized groups within U.S. society. This changed with the advent of survey research in the 1930s. Her detailed documentation of the Littletown study – arguably the first large scale social science study of the 20th century – shows that it marked a move away from the study of the marginal. Instead, the lead researchers, in choosing their research site, specifically chose a town that was less diverse than the average American town at that time. Littletown had fewer African Americans and immigrants than other Midwestern towns of similar size. They chose Littletown in order to minimize the variance in their study. Theirs was the first move towards the normative “middle.” In other words, scholars became interested in the averages, the center of the normal curve, rather than the “tails,” which is what the focus had been previously.

What this has meant, across six decades of social science research focused on generalizability based on the normal curve, often is the erasure of the experiences of minority populations. By definition, the statistical approaches we use in order to arrive at significant findings have spent thousands of pages in journals figuring out how to decrease variance and flatten the results in order to minimize error and arrive at statistically significant results. This is an epistemology rooted in majoritarianism. Any subgroup within the sample that meaningfully varies from the majority will be treated as “noise” to be addressed through statistical manipulation rather than as a phenomenon worthy of exploration on its own. One need only look at the fact that scholars using the ANES during those years when there was a Black oversample simply would remove those responses because they had a negative impact on the
standard errors. Simon Jackman, co-PI of the ANES, announced at a public presentation in 2015 that the ANES would never again include Black and Latino oversamples as it had done in 2012 because their presence “interferes with general population inference.” The idea that meaningful inferences about the American population can be made without including any non-white respondents demonstrates how generalizability is, at its core, the epistemological embodiment of normative whiteness.

**Context**

Despite Tip O'Neil's observation that all politics is local, context is a factor that only rarely makes its way into political behavior models. Some of this is related to the focus on generalizability. By wanting all samples to be national and generalizable, by definition local contours are going to get lost. For most national survey samples, there are not enough individuals within a particular context to make meaningful claims about geographic differences. But, this epistemological fixation on generalizability makes no sense within the context of U.S. elections. We do not have national elections. All our elections, from the presidency on down, occur at the state, county, or local levels. The fact that our research does not in any way align with the ways Americans live their political lives and are able to express their preferences at the ballot box is a reflection of the hegemonic power of this epistemological framework. The end result is that we not little about the significant heterogeneity that exists in U.S. politics across various geographies.

This is a place where political science could learn from other areas of research. Education, as an example, has developed many sophisticated ways to model the role of context in particular individual-level outcomes (Rabe Hasketh). Given that Americans are nested within important institutional contexts that vary significantly across geographies, this is something we should be doing more of. That we have not is more an ideological and epistemological problem than a methodological one.

**No Theory of Power**

It is interesting that despite the fact that political science studies the place where power is expressed most directly, nationally and internationally, we do not talk more about how power influences politics at the individual or institutional levels. Those that study congress and public policy may talk about influence and strategy in terms of winners and losers, but there is little discussion of who has power and how the hierarchies within U.S. society might influence how we live our politics. Yet we know that some groups have more power than others in U.S. politics and we know that these hierarchies are rooted in U.S. history (Smith 1997). But that power is rarely made visible. I contend that our blindness to power comes from the fact that we study the powerful and that the founders of our discipline were from powerful positionalities themselves. It is very difficult to see power if you have it. That blindness has been embedded within the types of questions political scientists have asked and in the types of answers they are willing to consider.

Our hegemonic epistemologies therefore are very much focused on the status quo. Like baseball commentators, our job is to call balls and strikes. We are very sophisticated in our understanding of on base percentage, slugging percentage, and trends in batting averages over past seasons. But we rarely talk about why the field is shaped the way it is, or why we consider it acceptable that a homerun requires that a player hit the ball significantly farther in Boston's Wrigley field than in Yankee Stadium (some exceptions are recent work on inequality – Hacker and Pierson, Gilens). Talking about electoral outcomes without considering the deep and ongoing inequality that exists in access to political institutions across different populations in U.S. society misses everything that is happening off the
field, but that makes all the difference in terms of who wins the World Series. As Hancock (2015: 34 points out, “If no scholar (and presumably, no individual) can avoid their placement in ... the “matrix of domination,” then the account of reality demanded by such an impossibility of extrication must also shift, not simply how we know what we know” about the world. Ours has been a status quo discipline because the norms have been established by individuals who hold positions of power within that matrix of domination.

**How to Build Something Different**

The political science research of the past half century has taught us a great deal about white political behavior and the circumstances under which people of color behave similarly (or not) to whites. But our ability to understand U.S. political phenomena has been limited by the epistemological assumptions that have been hegemonic in our subfield. I contend that through a greater understanding of the biases we bring to our research we can improve our ability to study and explain U.S. social reality. To do that, we need to expand our understanding of “research transparency” to include not only preregistered study plans and public data sets. We also need scholars to make clear the ontological and epistemological assumptions they bring to their work. At every stage of the research process, scholars are making choices. Those choices are not value neutral. Only through the expectation that scholars delineate why they make their choices can we understand how our individual-level biases affect the questions we ask and how we choose to answer them.

At a minimum, scholars should question standard practices and explain why it is important to operationalize their particular study in that way. We should encourage scholars to experiment with alternative modeling approaches and do a better job of holding each other accountable for the systemic biases embedded within our work. We need to think more systematically about power and inequality and how they affect the structure and function of our democracy. We should make our assumptions visible and have more open conversations within the discipline about what knowledge we are valuing and why. We should ask each other what counts as “data”? What counts as “real”? Is causal inference the highest goal possible for social science? Given the complexity of the social world, it is unlikely that we will be able to definitively show causal relationships across all aspects of political life that are meaningful to individuals. Does that mean we should have nothing to say about political issues that do not meet this methodological standard?

These conversations are happening among interpretivist scholars in the field, but among mainstream political behavior researchers there has been a wholesale appropriation of the language of “science” without any meaningful conversation about what that means within the context of what we want to know and without any discussion of the ugly, exclusionary history embedded in many of the scientific approaches we employ today. My normative position is that our job is to make meaningful claims about the political world. That world is not simple, nor is it static. Our job is not simply to describe the world as it is, but also to help people imagine the world as it might be. To do that we need to be able to talk about power, about what matters within our democracy in terms of the distribution of influence and power, and conduct research that is relevant to the problems of today and the future.

Many would say that these normative concerns are “unscientific.” Yet, scientists regularly identify problems in the world and use their methodological tools in order to solve them. Climate scientists do not, now that it has been established that climate change is real, avoid engaging in experiments to address that issue. Cancer researchers do not treat the need to fight cancer as an open empirical question. Why do we believe that saying we need to address inequality in our politics is outside the
bounds of “science”? Politics is the method though which we work together to solve our collective problems. If we cannot agree that our job is to shed light on how to address those problems, then what is our research for? Our country is facing grave challenges. We need to do a better job of providing the evidence base needed to address those challenges.

References


Evans, Peter B., Skocpol, Theda, and Dietrich Rüschemeyer. 1985. Bringing the state back in. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.


ENDNOTES

i Source for education data, U.S. Census, source for turnout data: http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0781453.html [last accessed 30 August 2016].


vi Ravitch and Carl, p. 48.

vii Merriam, pp. 313-315.


ix Campbell et al., p. 279

x Campbell et al., p. 283

xi Campbell et al., p. 316.


xiii Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, p. 9.