

Political Context and the Survey Response: The Dynamics of Racial Policy Opinion

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Several recent studies suggest that the social dynamics at work in the survey interview may play a significant role in determining the answers individuals give to survey questions, most notably on questions relating to racial policies. In this note I reexamine and extend the conclusions of my previous study (1999) that finds opinion polls overstate support for policies designed to promote racial equality. I use data from the early 1970s to show that the strong social desirability effects I find in the 1990s do not characterize opinion in earlier eras. The analyses reported here indicate that while we need to pay attention to and account for the social context surrounding sensitive issues when gauging public opinion, we must also pay attention to changes in that context over time.

In recent years, there has been a movement among scholars of public opinion to consider more fully the effect of the social forces at work in the survey interview. These authors recognize that the survey interview is a “conversation at random” (Converse and Schuman 1974) and acknowledge that as a result, the interview will be governed by many of the same dynamics as everyday conversations, such as social desirability concerns. In some cases, these effects may play a large role in determining the answers individuals give to survey questions, most notably on questions relating to racial policies (Berinsky 1999; Krysan 1998; Kuklinski and Cobb 1998; Kuklinski, Cobb, and Gilens 1997; Reeves 1997). For example, Kuklinski and Cobb (1998) find that unobtrusive measures of racial attitudes reveal significant levels of hidden racial animosity among white southerners. The central point of these studies is extremely impor-

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tant. The norms that govern the discussion of racial matters are not set aside once discussion of politics begins—be that a discussion in a town meeting or a survey interview. To understand public opinion, then, researchers must pay close attention to the ways in which people publicly discuss politically relevant topics.

In this note, I bring a dynamic perspective to the study of the effect of social norms on the discussion of sensitive topics. I reexamine and extend the conclusions of my 1999 study that found opinion polls overstate support for policies designed to promote racial equality. I found that some individuals who harbor racially conservative opinions may conceal their sentiments by abstaining from survey questions. While the findings of bias characterize integration opinion in the present day, these findings do not typify public sentiment over time. Specifically, I use data from the 1972 National Election Studies (NES) to show that the strong social desirability effects I found in the 1990s do not characterize opinion in earlier eras.

The Rhetoric of Race

The climate surrounding racial policy questions in the 1990s is very different from that of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the present day, as I noted in my 1999 piece, social pressures exist that make it difficult to talk frankly about race. These pressures may lead some individuals—those who oppose particular policies designed to ensure racial equality but do not want to be viewed as racist—to abstain from certain questions concerning race.¹ Evidence from the 2000 NES Pilot Study lends support to the conclusion that respondents are sensitive to the presentational implication of their answers to survey questions. In the study, respondents were told, “Some people say that the government in Washington should see to it that white and black children go to the same schools. Others claim that this is not the government’s business.” One half of these respondents were asked what answer they would give if they wished to make the best possible impression on the interviewer; the other half were asked what they would say to make the worst possible impression. This question directly replicates the school integration question I examined. While there was no clear consensus on what the “best” answer should be, three-quarters of the sample said that claiming that integration “was not the government’s business” was the best way to make a bad impression. As a point of comparison, this figure is approximately the same as the percentage of people who believed saying they “did not vote” would be the best way to make a bad public impression. Clearly, then, in the present day there exists a high sensitivity to the social norms governing discussion of racial policies.

¹The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neuman 1984) follows a logic somewhat similar to that presented here, arguing that individuals who hold viewpoints that they perceive as being in the minority will remain silent for fear that expressing their views will lead to social isolation.

Such strong traditions have not always existed in the United States. Over the last 30 years, Americans have become increasingly sensitive to issues of race. Consider, for example, the comparative performance of McConahay's Modern Racism Scale in the 1970s and 1990s (see also Kinder and Sanders 1996). McConahay was concerned that direct measures of "old-fashion prejudice"—for example agreement with the statement "Generally, do you feel blacks are not as smart as whites?"—would elicit socially desirable, rather than truthful, answers. The Modern Racism Scale was therefore developed to measure basic attitudes toward blacks in such a way that minimized the respondent's sensitivity to social pressures. In other words, the Modern Racism Scale was designed to be nonreactive on questions explicitly concerning matters of race (McConahay 1986). Experimental studies by McConahay and his colleagues in the 1970s indicated that the Modern Racism items possessed this quality (see McConahay 1986 for a review of these studies). But what was true in the 1970s does not hold in the modern era. Recent experiments conducted by Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, and Williams (1995) indicate that the Modern Racism Scale is now a highly reactive measure.² Thus, while there may have been indications of social desirability pressure in the early 1970s on some matters explicitly concerning the abilities of blacks, today that pressure extends even to more implicitly racial questions.³

Put simply, today's world is very different from the world of the early 1970s. And it is different in ways that should affect how people react to survey questions on issues concerning racial policy. It is plausible, if not likely, that the differences in the norms governing the discussion of racial issues described above could have led respondents to approach the NES integration question in a different manner than respondents do in the present day. It is instructive, then, to examine the effect of these larger societal changes on the individual-level question answering process. To assess the effects of changes in the larger social context on the process of opinion expression, I replicated my school integration analysis with data from the 1972 NES to see just how the findings of bias in integration opinion hold up over time.⁴

²In addition, a study by Swim, Aikin, Hall, and Hunter (1995) finds that the Modern Racism scale is no longer empirically distinct from the "old-fashioned prejudice" scale. This result suggests that the Modern Racism scale may be as reactive as the more blatant racial items.

³We can see this increased sensitivity not only in experimental data, but also in records of conversations with ordinary citizens. Bob Blauner (1989), for example, compiled a series of interviews concerning race relations with a group of respondents in San Francisco in 1968. He then followed up with these respondents in 1979 and 1986. Even a casual glance at the transcripts reveals that the change in the rhetoric of some of the respondents is striking.

⁴The results presented here are not specific to the 1972 data set. Analyses using data from 1968 yields results substantively similar to those presented here (results are available from author upon request).

Data and Analysis

Aggregate public opinion on the school integration question in 1972 was very different from opinion in the early 1990s.⁵ Only 18% of respondents failed to give an opinion on the question, compared with 35% in 1992.⁶ Of those who did express a preference, 45% supported government intervention, compared with 49% in 1992. But though the differences in the marginals across the two eras may be interesting, the more critical question for the present purpose is how well those marginals represent underlying public sentiment on the integration issue. For this task, I returned to the model I used in my previous work.

Using data from the 1992 NES, I found a link between the process by which people decide if they have an opinion and the processes by which they decide their opinion. Specifically, I found that the unmeasured factors which lead someone to answer the school integration question are correlated with the unmeasured factors which lead them to give a more racially liberal response on the integration question. I measured the extent and nature of the link between these factors by jointly modeling the processes in a bivariate probit selection model (Dubin and Rivers 1989–90; Greene 1997). In this model, the presence of social desirability effects can be determined by the statistical and substantive significance of the parameter estimate of ρ , the correlation of the errors between the two equations.⁷ But the estimate of ρ merely provides a test of whether selection bias exists. To gauge the extent and direction of the bias, we must look at how the coefficients change once the correction for selection bias is introduced and estimate the resulting effects on the predicted patterns of behavior of the respondents. In short, an examination of ρ allows us to detect if selection bias poses a problem to our inferences. The extent of the problem can

⁵The school integration question reads, “Some people say that the government in Washington should see to it that white and black children are allowed to go to the same schools. Others claim that this is not the government’s business. Have you been concerned enough about this question to favor one side over the other? [If yes] Do you think the government in Washington should see to it that white and black children go to the same schools, or stay out of this area, as it is not their business?”

⁶It should be noted that the rate of “don’t know” responses is high for the school integration question in the present day, relative to other questions concerning racial policy. In all likelihood this difference is due to the presence of a full filter. This filter is an explicit invitation to the respondent not to provide a substantive answer to the question. This structure is advantageous for my purposes because it gives respondents who are uncomfortable expressing anti-egalitarian sentiment an easy way to avoid answering the question: rather than put themselves in a socially difficult position, the respondent can pass on answering the question altogether.

⁷The effects of social desirability are captured in the error terms because we cannot directly measure their effects. However, to the extent that the unmeasured effects are correlated with the measured variables in the model, the bivariate probit technique can measure the effect of selection bias through the coefficients on those variables. In the analyses of the 1989 New York City preelection polling data reported in my 1999 piece, for example, the coefficient on the age variable increases by 50% in the bivariate probit estimates, as compared to the independent probit estimates. This result indicates that older respondents were more sensitive to social desirability concerns.

be gauged only by examining the effect of the selection bias correction on the predictors of opinion.

In my 1992 analysis, I found that ρ is positive, indicating that the unmeasured factors that lead someone to answer the school integration question are correlated with the unmeasured factors that lead them to give a more racially liberal response on the integration question. I went on to determine the consequences of selection bias on estimates of school integration opinion. In further analyses, I demonstrated that these results are robust across a variety of model specifications and replicable in data from 1990 and 1994 (see Berinsky 2000). If my hypothesis concerning the effect of the social climate of the 1970s is correct, data from the early 1970s will lead to a different result. Specifically, if I am correct, the unmeasured factors that influence whether a respondent will offer a response to the school integration question will be independent of the unmeasured factors that lead that respondent to support or oppose government efforts to integrate schools. Under such circumstances, the estimate of ρ should be zero. More important, the coefficients on the variables in the outcome equation should be unchanged by the selection bias correction. The critical tests here, as in my earlier analysis, are the size and sign of ρ and the effects of the selection bias correction on the coefficients in the outcome equation.⁸

While ideally I would like to replicate faithfully my analyses using the 1972 data, it is not possible to move the models employed in the 1990s to 1972. The NES data from 1972 differ from the 1990s data in two potentially meaningful ways. First, the political climate surrounding racial politics and the distribution of opinion across racial lines on questions concerning both the principle of school integration and policy of government intervention make estimation of the model using the full sample of respondents difficult from both a statistical and an inferential standpoint.⁹ I therefore analyzed the school integration question-answering models in 1972 using only white respondents. This move does not pose a threat to inferences concerning changes in opinion across the two eras. Whites, as I noted in the 1999 piece, appear in the present day to be significantly more likely than blacks to hold their tongue rather than reveal an anti-

⁸The strategy, then, is simple. Ultimately, selection bias models are important because they allow us to account for the unmeasured (and, indeed, unmeasurable) factors that drive the selection process. The bivariate probit selection model allows us to gauge the correlation between the errors in the selection and outcome equations. If there is no selection bias in a given model, we can say that the selection bias corrected estimates are identical to the full sample estimates. In such a case, there is nothing special about answering the question that distinguishes the question-answering from the full population.

⁹In particular, the model using the full sample of respondents in the 1972 data set failed to converge (in both Limdep 7.0 and Stata 7.0). This result is certainly somewhat troubling, but this non-convergence does not necessarily indicate that the analyses presented here are flawed. Heckman-type estimates can often be difficult to estimate. In addition, it should be noted that a model using the full sample of respondents (both black and white) to the 1972 guaranteed jobs question (analyzed below) converged, with no evidence of selection bias. Thus, convergent evidence suggests that the estimation problem is not damaging to the argument presented here.

integration opinion. In addition, a replication of my results from the 1990s that uses only white respondents indicates that the magnitude of selection bias is—not surprisingly—higher than it is in the full sample of whites and blacks (see Berinsky 2000). To the extent that the “whites only” analysis in 1972 indicates that respondents reacted to the question-answering process in a different manner than they did in the 1990s, we can be more confident in the estimates of change across the two eras.

A second potential problem is that the data set from 1972 is missing certain measures—such as the values and predisposition scales—that were strong predictors of opinion direction in contemporary times. However, the fact that these measures are missing does not jeopardize the analyses. As I reported in an earlier article (Berinsky 1999), the critical findings from the analyses of integration opinion in the 1990s—the presence of selection bias at the individual level and the overstatement of racial liberalism at the aggregate level—do not depend on the particular specification of the question-answering process. In fact, my results replicate with more limited specification of the selection and outcome processes (see Berinsky 2000). The concern with model specification here is important. Given the problems with estimating selection bias models, it is important to show that any differences over time are not merely a result of differences in specification. In Table 1, I present the results for an analysis of the 1992 school integration data that excludes the value scales and political variables used in my previous analysis (Berinsky 1999). As in that instance, I present coefficients for both (1) the case where the outcome equation is estimated separately from the selection equation—the “independent probit” model column—and (2) the case where the selection and outcome equations are estimated jointly in a bivariate probit selection model—the “bivariate probit” column—thereby accounting for possible selection bias in the question-answering process. Given the robustness of the results in the modern era across different models, conducting analyses with a streamlined model of opinion direction in the 1972 data set does not affect the comparison of the primary quantity of interest—namely, the degree of selection bias in the question-answering process.

With these concerns in mind, I estimated a model of the question-answering process in 1972 that followed the spirit if not the letter of my earlier analysis. Specifically, I modeled whites’ decision to offer an opinion on the integration question as a function of the following: (1) respondents’ level of political information,¹⁰ (2) their level of psychological and personal involvement with the

¹⁰Previous reviewers have suggested that excluding political information from the outcome equation is unreasonable because politically informed individuals would be more sensitive to racial policy questions. I argue that this exclusion is valid because information should increase the probability of giving an answer; it should have no effect on opinion direction independent of socialization experiences such as class and education. There is, in fact, no relationship between information and opinion direction once income and education are controlled. The exclusion restriction adopted here, then, is reasonable.

presidential campaign,¹¹ a dummy variable measuring whether they placed themselves on a liberal-conservative scale, and the same demographic variables used in the 1992 analysis.¹² I modeled the respondents' choice on the integration question as a function of party identification, ideological self-identification, trust in government, efficacy, and demographic control variables. I include the efficacy and trust in government scales in these analyses in an effort to compensate for the predictive power of the missing value scales. The basic thrust of the results remain the same if these scales are excluded from analysis.

In Table 2, I follow my earlier analytic strategy and present two sets of estimates. Specifically, I present coefficients for the "independent probit" model and the "bivariate probit" model (see above). By comparing the two sets of estimates, it is possible to determine the effects on our estimates of accounting for selection bias.

As expected, the results in Table 2 do not replicate the findings from the 1990s. In fact, the results from the 1970s are strikingly different. The selection bias that was so clearly present in the question-answering process in the 1990s is entirely absent. The estimate of ρ in 1972 is insignificant in both a statistical and a substantive sense, indicating that there is no detectable selection bias. Not surprisingly, then, accounting for the correlated errors has no effect on the coefficient estimates in the outcome equation. No coefficient that even approaches statistical or substantive significance—including the intercept—moves more than a few percentage points across the two specifications.¹³

Moreover, at the aggregate level, the predicted behavior of the collective sample is nearly identical across the independent probit and bivariate specifications. Though the models appear to under-predict support for government intervention to integrate schools, the degree of this under-prediction is constant across both the independent probit and bivariate probit specifications. The mean predicted probability of giving a supportive response under the independent

¹¹ This measure is a scale of interest in the campaign and the performance of five campaign acts: (1) voting in the presidential election, (2) trying to convince other people they should vote for one of the parties or candidates, (3) attending political meetings, (4) doing work for one of the parties or candidates, and (5) wearing a button supporting one of the parties or candidates. This scale has a reasonable alpha of .60.

¹² Specifically, I included measures of a respondent's: age, age squared, sex, education, income, number of school-age children, area of residence, and religion. I also included measures of the SMSA size of the respondent's neighborhood because I believed that respondents who lived in suburbs and cities might be less supportive of integration efforts than other respondents.

¹³ Some reviewers have raised the point that the first-stage selection model is a poor model of the decision to offer an opinion. While the model of the decision to offer an opinion is certainly not ideal, it does contain significant predictors of "opinionation," such as political information. Moreover, this model is robust to respecification; using different variables in the selection model does not change the results of estimation. Other commentators have noted that many of the typical predictors of "don't know" responses—such as education and age—are not significant in this model. This "non-finding" is a result of the multivariate statistical analyses used in this paper. Traditional predictors of the "don't know" response are significant in bivariate previously (Berinsky 1999).

TABLE 1
1992 School Integration Question

Variable	Independent Probit Coefficient (SE)	Bivariate Probit Coefficient (SE)
Outcome Equation		
Constant	1.072 (0.359)**	0.340 (0.407)
Age	-4.231 (1.352)**	-3.385 (1.305)**
Age ²	4.130 (1.339)**	3.519 (1.267)**
Black	0.994 (0.125)**	0.917 (0.137)**
Hispanic	0.946 (0.179)**	0.786 (0.202)**
Male	-0.253 (0.084)**	-0.171 (0.085)
Homeowner	-0.080 (0.088)	-0.055 (0.079)
Education	0.249 (0.184)	0.222 (0.163)
Income: <\$10,000	0.118 (0.148)	0.113 (0.135)
Income: \$10,000-\$14,999	0.065 (0.148)	0.093 (0.132)
Income: \$15,000-\$24,999	-0.053 (0.137)	-0.073 (0.127)
Income: \$35,000-\$49,999	-0.262 (0.134)*	-0.255 (0.124)**
Income: \$50,000-\$74,999	-0.328 (0.138)**	-0.315 (0.126)**
Income: \$75,000+	-0.192 (0.165)	-0.141 (0.154)
Income Not Ascertained	-0.137 (0.182)	-0.248 (0.165)
North-Central	-0.243 (0.114)**	-0.190 (0.106)*
South	-0.290 (0.129)**	-0.201 (0.120)*
West	-0.047 (0.125)	-0.005 (0.113)
Grew Up in South	0.074 (0.118)	0.062 (0.107)
No Religion	0.225 (0.119)*	0.124 (0.113)
Catholic	0.141 (0.100)	0.099 (0.092)
Jewish	0.341 (0.260)	0.370 (0.244)
Other Religion	-0.027 (0.131)	-0.039 (0.117)
Occupation: Professional	0.020 (0.143)	0.100 (0.132)
Occupation: Manager	-0.109 (0.174)	-0.067 (0.158)
Occupation: White-Collar	-0.147 (0.148)	-0.090 (0.136)
Occupation: Self Employed	-0.237 (0.170)	-0.166 (0.158)
Occupation: Skilled Worker	0.137 (0.171)	0.169 (0.157)
Occupation: Homemaker	-0.203 (0.159)	-0.117 (0.150)
Occupation: Other	-0.238 (0.138)*	-0.213 (0.128)*
Selection Equation		
Constant		0.151 (0.297)
Age		-0.131 (1.104)
Age ²		0.524 (1.111)
Black		0.313 (0.104)**
Hispanic		0.094 (0.133)
Male		0.014 (0.071)
Homeowner		0.036 (0.071)
Education		-0.285 (0.163)*
Income: <\$10,000		0.109 (0.121)
Income: \$10,000-\$14,999		0.140 (0.123)
Income: \$15,000-\$24,999		-0.062 (0.111)
Income: \$35,000-\$49,999		-0.118 (0.108)

TABLE 1 *continued*

Variable	Independent Probit Coefficient (SE)	Bivariate Probit Coefficient (SE)
<i>Selection Equation (continued)</i>		
Income: \$50,000–\$74,999		–0.088 (0.111)
Income: \$75,000+		0.038 (0.141)
Income Not Ascertained		–0.235 (0.139)*
North-Central		0.015 (0.091)
South		0.111 (0.106)
West		0.078 (0.101)
Grew Up in South		0.006 (0.101)
No Religion		–0.123 (0.093)
Catholic		–0.014 (0.081)
Jewish		0.185 (0.233)
Other Religion		–0.058 (0.105)
Occupation: Professional		0.184 (0.117)
Occupation: Manager		0.007 (0.135)
Occupation: White-Collar		0.056 (0.116)
Occupation: Self Employed		0.051 (0.135)
Occupation: Skilled Worker		0.133 (0.137)
Occupation: Homemaker		0.055 (0.126)
Occupation: Other		–0.084 (0.108)
Political Information		0.444 (0.148)**
Discuss Politics		0.319 (0.099)**
No Ideology		–0.235 (0.072)**
Number of School-Age Children		0.061 (0.261)
Refusal Conversion		0.156 (0.245)
Persuasion Letter		0.005 (0.125)
Number of Calls		–0.016 (0.043)
<i>Correlation Parameters</i>		
ρ		0.758 (0.207)**
N/Log Likelihood	1283/–793.699	1975/–2029.214

* = $p < .10$; ** = $p < .05$

probit model is 39.5%, while under the bivariate probit specification it is 41.0%.¹⁴ This gap of 1.5 points pales in comparison to that found in the 1990s data.

In sum, the results from the 1972 data speak as loudly as those from the 1990s; they just tell a very different story. In the early 1970s, unlike the present day, respondents did not refrain from expressing their views. “Don’t know” really meant “I don’t know.” Thus, it appears that the change in the larger social and political environment surrounding issues of integration from the 1970s to the 1990s changed the individual process of attitude expression. As a result,

¹⁴I performed these simulations following the methods I described earlier.

TABLE 2
1972 School Integration Question

Variable	Independent Probit Coefficient (SE)	Bivariate Probit Coefficient (SE)
Outcome Equation		
Constant	0.417 (0.292)	0.446 (0.322)
Age	-4.565 (1.247)**	-4.539 (1.377)**
Age ²	4.712 (1.342)**	4.698 (1.456)**
Male	0.027 (0.072)	0.029 (0.074)
Education	0.307 (0.165)*	0.310 (0.166)*
Income: <\$4,000	0.008 (0.120)	0.007 (0.125)
Income: \$4,000-\$5,999	-0.042 (0.125)	-0.039 (0.126)
Income: \$6,000-\$11,999	-0.019 (0.091)	-0.018 (0.091)
Income: \$25,000+	-0.108 (0.166)	-0.124 (0.197)
Income Not Ascertained	-0.114 (0.283)	-0.068 (0.422)
Large City	-0.257 (0.158)*	-0.256 (0.161)
Small City	-0.050 (0.099)	-0.052 (0.102)
Small Suburbs	-0.204 (0.090)**	-0.204 (0.090)**
Deep South	-0.492 (0.193)**	-0.506 (0.203)**
Peripheral South	-0.251 (0.141)*	-0.260 (0.156)*
Border States	-0.011 (0.128)	-0.012 (0.131)
West	0.043 (0.101)	0.039 (0.103)
Raised in South	-0.100 (0.145)	-0.099 (0.145)
No Religion	0.104 (0.195)	0.092 (0.221)
Catholic	0.092 (0.089)	0.095 (0.090)
Jewish	0.342 (0.266)	0.325 (0.289)
Other Religion	-0.021 (0.183)	-0.028 (0.189)
Number of Children	0.046 (0.072)	0.051 (0.077)
Trust Government	0.268 (0.151)*	0.269 (0.152)*
Efficacy	0.166 (0.094)*	0.165 (0.096)*
Party Identification	0.024 (0.063)	0.024 (0.063)
Liberal	0.501 (0.110)**	0.498 (0.114)**
Conservative	-0.126 (0.095)	-0.127 (0.096)
No Ideology	0.033 (0.101)	0.055 (0.177)
Selection Equation		
Constant		1.160 (0.313)**
Age		-1.032 (1.254)
Age ²		0.823 (1.318)
Male		-0.089 (0.081)
Education		-0.199 (0.182)
Income: <\$4,000		0.022 (0.126)
Income: \$4,000-\$5,999		-0.068 (0.128)
Income: \$6,000-\$11,999		-0.045 (0.100)
Income: \$25,000+		0.359 (0.223)
Income Not Ascertained		-0.721 (0.215)**
Large City		-0.045 (0.178)
Small City		0.043 (0.109)
Small Suburbs		0.015 (0.097)

TABLE 2 *continued*

Variable	Independent Probit Coefficient (SE)	Bivariate Probit Coefficient (SE)
Selection Equation (<i>continued</i>)		
Deep South		0.287 (0.192)
Peripheral South		0.189 (0.150)
Border States		0.001 (0.130)
West		0.074 (0.117)
Raised in South		0.010 (0.149)
No Religion		0.206 (0.242)
Catholic		-0.065 (0.092)
Jewish		0.394 (0.379)
Other Religion		0.140 (0.229)
Number of Children		-0.074 (0.076)
Political Information		0.550 (0.218)**
Engagement		0.125 (0.212)
No Ideology		-0.306 (0.096)**
Correlation Parameters		
ρ		-0.135 (0.882)
N/Log Likelihood	1382/-864.501	1666/-1591.654

* = $p < .10$; ** = $p < .05$

unlike the present day, the aggregate signals carried through opinion polls were congruent with underlying public sentiment on that issue.

An Independent Confirmation: Fair Employment

To this point, I have presented strong evidence of the consequences of opinion withholding on the shape of opinion concerning school integration in 1972 and 1992. However, it remains to be shown that the findings presented above can be extended beyond that issue domain to other racially sensitive controversies. Fortunately, there exists a question on the NES survey well suited to such replication—the NES fair employment question.

In the 1992 NES survey, respondents were asked whether they thought that the federal government should see to it that blacks get fair treatment in jobs.¹⁵ Given the similarities between the two issue areas, the dynamics of the fair employment question-answering process should follow the basic pattern of the

¹⁵Specifically, the question reads, "Some people feel that if black people are not getting fair treatment in jobs, the government in Washington ought to see to it that they do. Others feel that this is not the federal government's business. Have you had enough interest in this question to favor one side over the other? [If yes] How do you feel? Should the government in Washington see to it that black people get fair treatment in jobs or is this not the federal government's business?"

school integration question-answering process. By examining the fair employment data using the same models of selection employed above, then, I can determine whether my findings can be extended past the area of school integration into other racially sensitive political controversies.

To make sure I mimicked as closely as possible my analyses across the two racial policy items, I employed the same model specifications I originally used to predict opinion on school integration to predict responses to the fair employment question in 1992 (Berinsky 1999).¹⁶ The results of this analysis, presented in Table 3, are straightforward and clear. Table 3 demonstrates that the pattern of selection bias in the fair employment question closely follows that of the school integration question. ρ is positive and highly significant, indicating that significant selection bias exists in the question-answering process. More important from a substantive standpoint, accounting for selection bias changes our estimates of the effects of the determinants of opinion. For example, correcting for selection bias in the 1992 analyses increases the size of the race coefficient by over 30%. This result indicates that the divide between black and white respondents is even greater than it appears to be from the independent probit results, a result that mimics my previous school integration results. Finally, correcting aggregate fair employment opinion for selection bias yields results very similar to the integration opinion data. Specifically, predicted support for fair employment is much lower under the condition where selection bias is corrected, relative to the “uncorrected” specification—45.8% to 56.0%, to be precise. In this case, correcting for selection bias in the fair employment data in 1992 paints a very different picture not only of the intensity of opinion, but the direction of opinion as well.¹⁷

Looking at the data from 1972, the familiar pattern again emerges.¹⁸ Table 4 demonstrates that the pattern of selection bias in the fair employment question closely mimics that of the school integration question in 1972. ρ is insignificant in both a statistical and a substantive sense, indicating that in fair employment as in school integration, the bias found in the 1992 data is absent from the 1972 results. Again, when the 1972 variable specification is used to estimate the selection bias model in 1992, ρ is highly significant. The differences found concerning the presence of selection bias in 1972 and 1992 are not, therefore, an artifact of the use of different models in the two data sets. Moving to a comparison of the other estimates in the table, the largest change in any statistically significant coefficient occurs in the second decimal place and is no more than a couple of percentage points difference. Not surprisingly, then, the predicted behavior of the collective sample is nearly identical across

¹⁶I did, however, remove the school-age children variable because it was not directly relevant to the fair employment question.

¹⁷As with the school integration data, the effects grow stronger when blacks are excluded from the sample.

¹⁸As with the school integration question, the 1972 analysis was performed using whites only.

the independent probit and bivariate probit specifications. The mean probability of supporting government involvement is 47.3%, while under the bivariate probit, it is 45.6%—an insignificant change of under two percentage points. Thus, accounting for selection bias does not at all change our view of public sentiment on this issue.

These results are especially important because they provide additional evidence for the massive change that has occurred over the past 20 years in the way that individuals approach the process of attitude expression on racial policy questions. Over time, the gap between underlying public sentiment and expressed opinion on racial policy matters has grown significantly.¹⁹

Discussion and Conclusions

The results presented in this research note speak clearly to the question of how survey respondents approach the school integration question specifically and sensitive issues more generally. As expected, differences in the norms governing the discussion of racial issues between the early 1970s and the 1990s led to significant differences in the way in which individuals approached the question-answering process. The concealment of anti-integration sentiment behind the “don’t know” response that is present in the current era appears to be considerably muted in the earlier era.

In the 1970s, like the present day, the decision to adopt the “don’t know” response was not a random process. But the shape of the process by which individuals select the “don’t know” response has changed greatly over the last 25 years. In both the 1970s and today, the pool of “don’t know” respondents contain a mix of, first, those individuals who are unable to form coherent and well grounded opinions on the integration question and, second, those individuals who are able to form such opinions but are hesitant to express them for fear of social sanctions.²⁰ Taken together, this work and my earlier work indicate that in the 1970s, the mix of “don’t knows” were largely of the first type; in the present day, many more are of the second type.

But the more important lessons to be drawn lie in the implications of this work for understanding how the survey response is shaped by the larger social norms governing the discussion of the issues of the day. While we need to pay

¹⁹At a more technical level, these results also provide suggestive evidence that the selection bias found in the school integration case in 1992 is endemic to the question-answering process and not simply the result of a change in question wording from 1972 to 1992 described by Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, and Krysan (1997). For a more complete discussion of this point, see Berinsky (2000).

²⁰It is also the case that the questions examined here are somewhat vague items. But it is because respondents can interpret—and be interpreted—in different ways that social context comes to play a role in the question-answering process. Supporting this view, Krysan (1999) finds that respondents may interpret the fair employment question in light of current discussion concerning affirmative action. More concrete questions might elicit different patterns of response, but the questions examined here reflect the complex mix of principles and policy that the government must confront.

TABLE 3
1992 Fair Employment Question

Variable	Independent Probit Coefficient (SE)	Bivariate Probit Coefficient (SE)
Outcome Equation		
Constant	1.354 (0.549)**	0.441 (0.637)
Age	-1.125 (1.498)	-0.122 (1.515)
Age ²	0.177 (1.483)	-0.486 (1.461)
Black	0.360 (0.163)**	0.472 (0.150)**
Hispanic	0.237 (0.194)	0.184 (0.191)
Male	0.251 (0.096)**	0.262 (0.092)**
Homeowner	0.076 (0.097)	0.040 (0.095)
Education	0.123 (0.207)	0.333 (0.209)
Income: <\$10,000	0.224 (0.168)	0.285 (0.157)
Income: \$10,000-\$14,999	0.277 (0.169)*	0.347 (0.157)**
Income: \$15,000-\$24,999	0.095 (0.153)	0.126 (0.146)
Income: \$35,000-\$49,999	0.084 (0.147)	0.109 (0.137)
Income: \$50,000-\$74,999	0.036 (0.149)	0.075 (0.137)
Income: \$75,000+	0.177 (0.180)	0.228 (0.176)
Income Not Ascertained	0.157 (0.199)	0.157 (0.189)
North-Central	-0.119 (0.122)	-0.097 (0.116)
South	0.044 (0.142)	0.072 (0.137)
West	0.149 (0.136)	0.165 (0.129)
Grew Up in South	0.170 (0.135)	0.125 (0.135)
No Religion	-0.074 (0.138)	-0.075 (0.134)
Catholic	0.049 (0.108)	0.029 (0.100)
Jewish	0.331 (0.284)	0.457 (0.300)
Other Religion	0.009 (0.147)	-0.007 (0.148)
Occupation: Professional	-0.156 (0.160)	-0.051 (0.162)
Occupation: Manager	-0.532 (0.184)**	-0.446 (0.173)**
Occupation: White-Collar	-0.110 (0.167)	-0.062 (0.159)
Occupation: Self Employed	-0.262 (0.175)	-0.140 (0.168)
Occupation: Skilled Worker	-0.104 (0.182)	-0.011 (0.171)
Occupation: Homemaker	-0.033 (0.173)	0.062 (0.164)
Occupation: Other	-0.011 (0.153)	-0.009 (0.142)
Racial Resentment	-3.519 (0.392)**	-3.150 (0.453)**
Equality	1.382 (0.251)**	1.214 (0.255)**
Trust in Government	0.540 (0.199)**	0.471 (0.191)**
Moral Conservatism	-0.213 (0.221)	-0.185 (0.201)
Religious Importance	0.176 (0.124)	0.187 (0.114)
Party Identification	0.048 (0.073)	0.048 (0.065)
Liberal	0.205 (0.127)*	0.196 (0.114)
Conservative	-0.016 (0.110)	-0.006 (0.100)
No Ideology	-0.129 (0.123)	-0.228 (0.114)**
Selection Equation		
Constant		-0.936 (0.333)**
Age		1.805 (1.175)
Age ²		-1.140 (1.170)

TABLE 3 *continued*

Variable	Independent Probit Coefficient (SE)	Bivariate Probit Coefficient (SE)
<i>Selection Equation (continued)</i>		
Black		0.598 (0.118)**
Hispanic		0.018 (0.136)
Male		0.063 (0.077)
Homeowner		-0.112 (0.078)
Education		0.499 (0.178)**
Income: <\$10,000		0.263 (0.130)
Income: \$10,000-\$14,999		0.269 (0.133)
Income: \$15,000-\$24,999		0.118 (0.116)
Income: \$35,000-\$49,999		0.049 (0.117)
Income: \$50,000-\$74,999		0.070 (0.120)
Income: \$75,000+		0.223 (0.160)
Income Not Ascertained		0.089 (0.152)
North-Central		0.016 (0.098)
South		0.075 (0.118)
West		0.103 (0.108)
Grew Up in South		-0.119 (0.109)
No Religion		-0.024 (0.101)
Catholic		-0.020 (0.088)
Jewish		0.446 (0.311)
Other Religion		-0.037 (0.113)
Occupation: Professional		0.230 (0.127)*
Occupation: Manager		0.075 (0.147)
Occupation: White-Collar		0.101 (0.122)
Occupation: Self Employed		0.294 (0.146)*
Occupation: Skilled Worker		0.192 (0.148)
Occupation: Homemaker		0.276 (0.135)**
Occupation: Other		-0.025 (0.114)
Political Information		0.553 (0.166)**
Discuss Politics		0.661 (0.112)**
No Ideology		-0.230 (0.080)**
Refusal Conversion		0.294 (0.264)
Persuasion Letter		-0.002 (0.140)
Number of Calls		0.040 (0.047)
<i>Correlation Parameters</i>		
ρ		0.651 (0.211)**
N/Log Likelihood	1314/-664.7627	1889/-1717.426

* = $p < .10$; ** = $p < .05$

attention to and account for the social context surrounding sensitive issues when gauging public opinion, we must also pay attention to changes in that context over time. The social norms and conventions that govern discourse in society evolve over time and as those norms change, the way in which respondents

TABLE 4
1972 Fair Employment Question

Variable	Independent Probit Coefficient (SE)	Bivariate Probit Coefficient (SE)
Outcome Equation		
Constant	-0.195 (0.288)	-0.240 (0.303)
Age	-1.711 (1.175)	-1.840 (1.224)
Age ²	1.795 (1.241)	1.926 (1.289)
Male	0.107 (0.071)	0.110 (0.072)
Education	0.363 (0.162)**	0.375 (0.167)**
Income: <\$4,000	0.093 (0.119)	0.095 (0.118)
Income: \$4,000–\$5,999	-0.075 (0.124)	-0.068 (0.125)
Income: \$6,000–\$11,999	-0.073 (0.089)	-0.067 (0.091)
Income: \$25,000+	-0.199 (0.164)	-0.187 (0.174)
Income Not Ascertained	0.199 (0.258)	0.177 (0.263)
Large City	0.122 (0.152)	0.132 (0.151)
Small City	-0.097 (0.098)	-0.086 (0.102)
Small Suburbs	-0.012 (0.089)	-0.014 (0.088)
Deep South	-0.208 (0.185)	-0.198 (0.188)
Peripheral South	0.003 (0.143)	0.008 (0.148)
Border States	0.081 (0.126)	0.092 (0.133)
West	-0.109 (0.101)	-0.105 (0.103)
Raised in South	-0.030 (0.145)	-0.019 (0.151)
No Religion	0.254 (0.190)	0.274 (0.206)
Catholic	0.223 (0.087)**	0.222 (0.087)**
Jewish	0.514 (0.286)*	0.530 (0.297)*
Other Religion	0.129 (0.182)	0.140 (0.188)
Unemployed	0.091 (0.217)	0.097 (0.221)
Trust Government	0.238 (0.150)	0.232 (0.151)
Efficacy	0.206 (0.094)**	0.210 (0.095)**
Party Identification	0.044 (0.062)	0.042 (0.062)
Liberal	0.490 (0.110)**	0.493 (0.110)**
Conservative	-0.140 (0.093)	-0.135 (0.093)
No Ideology	0.092 (0.102)	0.065 (0.119)
Selection Equation		
Constant		0.716 (0.292)**
Age		-2.583 (1.211)**
Age ²		2.530 (1.292)**
Male		-0.029 (0.073)
Education		-0.063 (0.173)
Income: <\$4,000		0.068 (0.119)
Income: \$4,000–\$5,999		0.100 (0.127)
Income: \$6,000–\$11,999		0.050 (0.091)
Income: \$25,000+		0.140 (0.180)
Income Not Ascertained		-0.194 (0.226)
Large City		0.078 (0.165)
Small City		0.144 (0.100)
Small Suburbs		-0.047 (0.087)

TABLE 4 *continued*

Variable	Independent Probit Coefficient (SE)	Bivariate Probit Coefficient (SE)
Selection Equation (<i>continued</i>)		
Deep South		0.085 (0.179)
Peripheral South		0.019 (0.129)
Border States		0.148 (0.126)
West		0.050 (0.105)
Raised in South		0.215 (0.131)*
No Religion		0.305 (0.201)
Catholic		-0.007 (0.085)
Jewish		0.225 (0.336)
Other Religion		0.166 (0.217)
Unemployed		0.074 (0.237)
Political Information		1.277 (0.202)**
Engagement		0.135 (0.176)
No Ideology		-0.162 (0.090)*
Correlation Parameters		
ρ		0.160 (0.372)
N/Log Likelihood	1362/-890.735	1761/-177.541

* = $p < .10$; ** = $p < .05$

react to the survey interview will change as well. The analyses presented here demonstrate that to understand change and stability in public opinion—at both the individual and aggregate levels—we need to focus on the particular social context surrounding given issues.

Tying an understanding of individual political cognition to an understanding of the larger social environment will enable us to better understand how mass opinion develops over time in reaction to changes in society. Here, in many ways my work reinforces the lessons and builds upon the work of Zaller (1992). In *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Zaller demonstrated that changes in elite discourse may alter the salience that individuals give to different considerations, or opinion ingredients. Over time, if the balance of the mix of elite messages found in the political world shifts, such a process can alter the shape of aggregate opinion. In this paper, I provide strong (albeit indirect) evidence that changes in the political world can change the shape of opinion not simply by altering the individual distribution of those opinion ingredients underlying opinions, but also by altering the costs to the respondents of freely speaking their minds. As the norms governing social interaction within a society change, respondents' ability to say what is on their minds changes. Thus, as the larger context surrounding an issue changes, the apparent distribution of opinion on those issues that touch upon social norms may change, regardless of the types of opinion ingredients people hold.

In short, to fully comprehend public opinion, we need to situate our understanding of how individuals answer survey questions in the context of the larger society in which the respondent-interviewer interaction takes place. Only then can the picture of the public's voice, as carried through opinion polls, be properly understood at any one moment in time.

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