Epistemological Bias in the Study of Political Behavior in the United States

Lisa García Bedolla
Principal Investigator

May 2019

Center on Democracy and Organizing
Institute of Governmental Studies
info@democracyandorganizing.org
University of California, Berkeley

CENTER on DEMOCRACY and ORGANIZING

Why is Epistemological Bias Important?

Epistemology refers to beliefs about what knowledge is and how it is created. Scholars have long discussed the biases that have existed within the social sciences since their founding, and how those biases reflect core problems regarding what knowledge is valued and therefore what questions are asked (Bonilla Silva and Zuberi 2008). The field of political behavior within political science contains significant biases of this type. 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 substantial gaps in our understanding of what drives individuals' behavior. For instance, even though the U.S. population has become significantly more educated and wealthier over the past thirty years, political participation levels have not risen to the degree one would expect if SES plays the causal role in driving participation. In 1960, 41.1% of people 25 years or older had completed high school or college; in 2012 that percentage more than doubled to 87.6%. Over the same period, voter turnout does not see the same substantial increase; instead, the 2016 turnout rate of 61.4% is similar to the 1960 rate (63.5%) (File 2017). Scholars of political behavior have generally allowed this apparent contradiction to stand unquestioned.

These significant research gaps within this field derive from an almost exclusive focus on individual-level predispositions or preferences as driving behavior, rather than considering the role structural differences in power and access play in U.S. politics. I call the dominant perspective "colorblind pluralism": a view of the U.S. political system that sees factors that affect a person's structural position, such as race, as irrelevant to the workings of politics and/or political engagement. For example, voter turnout models were mostly developed based on white respondents (which is viewed as an acceptable norm under the colorblind pluralist perspective). Such models do not work as well to explain participation among African Americans, Latinos, or Asian Americans. The source of this difference lies in structures of exclusion, rather than stemming from individual-level predispositions and preferences, as the colorblind pluralist perspective would claim.

Relatedly, 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 about political behavior, and without any discussion of the exclusionary history and resulting biases embedded in many of the scientific approaches employed today. Establishing causality lies at the center of this approach, without considering the implicit biases within the causal theories that feed into data interpretation. 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 that political studies that do not meet this methodological standard have nothing to say?

These biases lead researchers to not ask important questions and to ignore the biases embedded in the types of questions they ask, the evidence they gather, and the methodologies they employ to answer them.

What is CDO's role?

The Center on Democracy and Organizing (CDO) considers research to address inequality in our political system to be a vital undertaking for contemporary scholars. Politics is the method through which we work together to solve our collective problems; our job is to shed light on how to address those problems. Many would say that these normative epistemological 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.

CDO seeks to make visible the implicit assumptions and norms of research on political behavior that erase the experiences of people of color, women, and other vulnerable populations. We seek to reorient scholars toward an engaged scholarship that first recognizes the roots of the problem of epistemological bias, which I lay out below, in theoretical terms and as a function of scholars' own biases as individuals. This paper points out issues in methodological, theoretical, and ideological approaches to this research as a starting point for scholars to begin questioning ingrained biases and taking a different approach to research design and interpretation. It illuminates issues of power and structural inequality, and makes suggestions drawn from intersectionality theory, REP (race, ethnicity, and place) scholarship, and critiques of the status quo. While this paper speaks specifically to and draws examples from the political behavior field, the assessment of problems and potential solutions will be of use to a diversity of academic fields.

Theoretical Origins of the Problem

Part of the problem, arguably, is a basic assumption, rooted in political theorist Robert Dahl's vision of pluralism, that takes for granted the openness of the U.S. political system to all interest groups. Pluralism assumes that there is equal access to governmental institutions and that there is equality of opportunity to be heard within those institutions (García Bedolla and Andrade 2017). For Dahl, a key characteristic of democracy is the "continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals." He goes on to provide 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 2007, p. 2).

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 2000), sociology (Skocpol and Evans 1985), and race and politics (Hero 1992; Lee 2011). The purpose of this paper 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 when their interests are at stake.

At a fundamental level, Dahl's pluralism is rooted in an ontological rugged individualism that presumes *near absolute agency* on the part of all persons. He focuses on political institutions' willingness to provide citizens with the legal rights to engage politically, particularly the right to vote and/or engage in political contestation. But legal rights do not automatically translate into the *ability* to exercise those rights. Consider 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. Here individuals are granted rights that they are not allowed to exercise. By not concerning themselves with how power or structural inequality affect groups' ability to access their rights, scholars frame political behavior as simply 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 U.S. democracy.

Hand-in-hand with the faith in near absolute agency, public opinion scholars widely assume that there is *equality of individual agency*, defined as "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" (Junn and Masuoka 2015: 25). Junn and Masuoka critique the accepted wisdom by arguing that "agency at the individual level is constrained by relative group position," which in turn affects group-level attitudes towards political issues. This helps to explain why there is systematic variation by group in public opinions about a wide variety of topics. 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." Yet scholars of political behavior 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. An approach to public opinion that does not address the role of relational power structures remains, by definition, incomplete.

Similarly, pluralism assumes *equality of access*: that institutions of government are open to all and that each person's voice will be heard equally within them. Yet we know that some groups have more political power than others and that these hierarchies are rooted in U.S. history (Smith 1998). Looking historically at groups within the United States, equal access to governmental institutions has never been the norm, even among U.S. citizens. Consider women's exclusion from the franchise or the ability to engage in party politics. While Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens since the Jones Act was passed in 1917, they have no voice in the U.S. Senate and their elected representative in the House holds a seat but has no vote in the body. This is also true of residents of Washington, D.C. Beyond these formal exclusions, history shows us that Mexicans (Gutiérrez 2007, Hero 1992, Deverell 2005) and African Americans after emancipation (Alexander 2012, Dawson

2001, McAdam 1982) had limited rights to citizenship, particularly in relationship to the criminal justice system. In research on contemporary political behavior and representation, recent scholarship has demonstrated that congressional representatives, at a minimum, are much more responsive to their most affluent constituents (Gilens 2015). It follows logically that, if groups' relationships to democratic institutions vary, their patterns of engagement will likely vary as well. Scholars cannot understand fully how the political system works without centering the role that power and inequality have played and continue to play within it.

The Present Day: Issues of Interpretation and Analysis

These ontological and epistemological assumptions have been repeated (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. Though critical to a scholar's interpretation of the facts, casual theory too often operates invisibly, with the implicit assumptions behind the interpretation going unnoted or unchallenged (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008, p. 9). The fact that these models have entered the "real world" through field experimentation, means that these biases in model specification are having everyday effects on what we are asking about the political world and the answers we are getting to those questions. This section will address issues with both model specification and interpretation, making visible common assumptions about whiteness as generalizable, independence of characteristics, and the role of context.

People of Color as Deviations from the White (Male) Norm

As Sarah Igo points out in *The Averaged American* (Igo 2008), 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. Igo's 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 U.S. 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. In other words, scholars beginning with this time period became interested in the generalizability and averages, the center of the normal curve, rather than the "tails," which had been the prior focus.

What this has meant, across six decades of social science research focused on generalizability based on the normal curve, is the erasure of the experiences of minority populations, who tend to populate the tails of that distribution. Established statistical approaches used in order to arrive at significant findings have been the subject of 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.

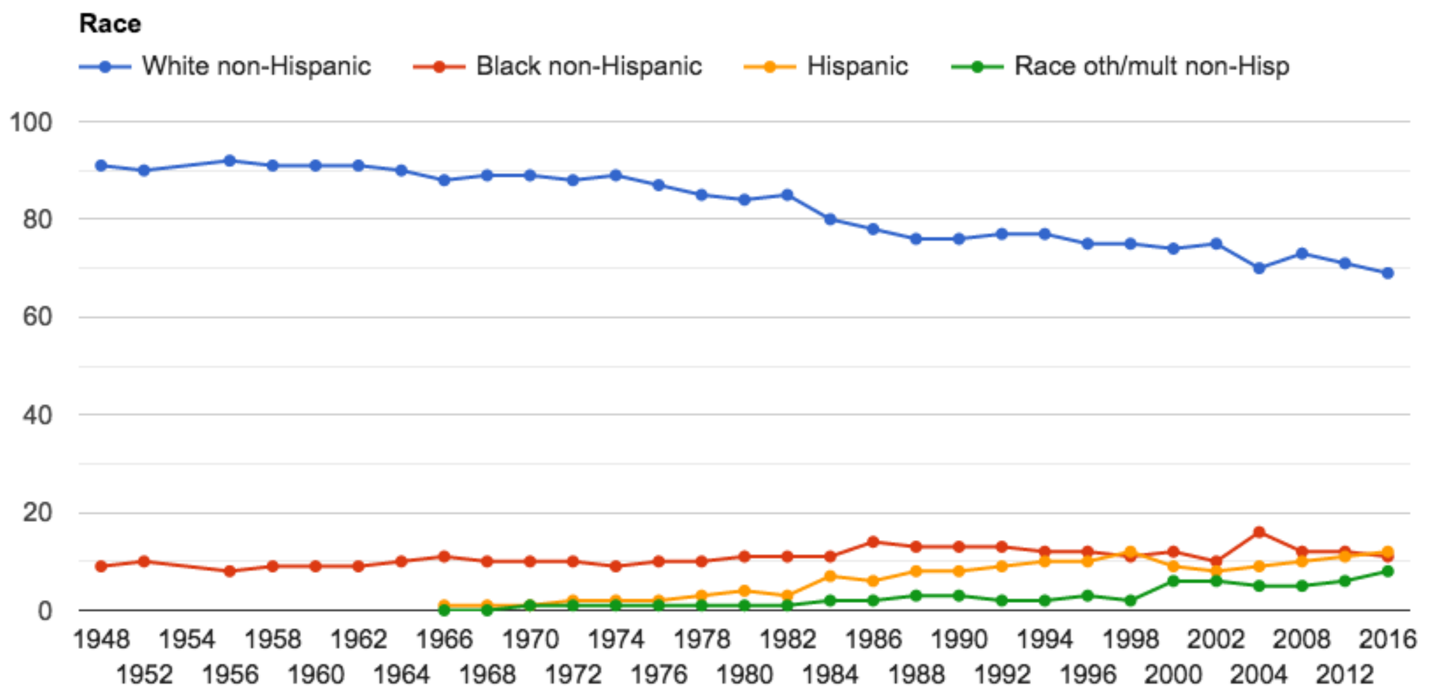
CENTER on DEMOCRACY and ORGANIZING

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. The universal subject that is at the core of these analyses is thus a white subject.

This erasure of minority populations can be particularly seen in the approach to the American National Election Studies (ANES), a survey run in every presidential election year since 1948, data which has formed the foundation of the political behavior field. As we can see in Figure 1, from 1948 to 2016, 80.8% of total ANES respondents were white.[i] It was not until 1984 that the ANES first included an oversample of black voters, which has occurred only four times in the survey's history: 1984, 2008, 2012, and 2016.

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. 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.

Figure 1: ANES Respondents by Race, 1948-2016



When surveys have included large enough samples of non-white respondents to make comparisons, race is most often 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 established way, but as a general rule papers do not justify this coding on theoretical or empirical grounds. This practice normalizes white male behavior and, by extension, pathologizes the behavior of people of color and women as deviations from an established, unquestioned, unraced, and ungendered norm. At a minimum, our coding practices and determination of the excluded categories should flow from our research question(s) and theoretical framework rather than simply established practice.

The secondary problem that arises from this operationalization is that whites themselves are treated as "unraced," overlooking the impact of whiteness as a racial category on political behavior. However, whiteness studies has made clear that the white racial category has had long term effects on U.S. history, politics, and public policy (Leonardo, Ignatiev, Jacobson). 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). 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 observe, there has been almost no theorizing of the impact of whiteness itself within the mainstream political behavior literature. As a result, we are unable to speak in a theoretically informed way about whether the roles resources, political interest, and party identification play in political engagement are actually products of power and privilege, rather than any axiomatic rules about how all individuals engage within U.S. politics. Without a comparison group, it is impossible to know the degree to which white participation patterns are a product of whiteness, rather than generalizable U.S. political norms.

Assumptions of Independence Versus Intersectional Framing

When political behavior scholars make statistical inferences based on the impact of a set of independent variables on a dependent variable, models almost always assume that those independent variables are independent and identically distributed (IID). In other words, for 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 calls the "billiard ball effect"—the assumption that independent variables within a regression model, such as dummies for race and gender, bounce off of each other like billiard balls instead of being deeply interdependent.

Given that social factors such as race, gender, and class are interrelated with one another, standard methodological practice does not align with what history and theory tell us about the nature of these categories (Zuberi and Bonilla Silva 2008). Decades of data on income and educational inequality by racial group status, for instance, shows strong

correlation across these two factors. Despite this, accepted practices in model specification assume that socioeconomic status (among other things) is independent of racial or gender status. That ontological vision of the relationship across relevant categories is simply empirically wrong, which ensures that the estimates and conclusions resulting from that operationalization will also be flawed. These accepted practices have no roots in statistics, but rather through consensus-making among practitioners within a particular discipline.

Statistical model specifications and interpretive approaches would benefit from the insights of intersectionality theory, which calls into question assumptions about the relationships among social categories (Crenshaw 1991, Hancock 2016). At the most basic level, intersectionality theory teaches us that positionalities such as race and gender are mutually constitutive: their impacts cannot be disentangled or separated out from one another. As Hancock (2016: 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 similarly 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.

How to Build Something Different: What Can Scholars Do?

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 this subfield. Through a greater understanding of the biases scholars bring to their 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 go beyond just 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. CDO's work encourages 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. The Center supports scholarship that thinks systematically about power and inequality and how each affect the structure and function of our democracy to make meaningful claims about the political world. We seek to make our assumptions visible and have more open conversations within the discipline about what knowledge we are valuing and why. Scholars should ask each other what counts as "data"? What kinds of knowledges count as "real"? Is causal inference the highest goal possible for social science? How is power operating within the research project *and* within society itself?

As a center advocating an engaged approach to scholarly work on democracy and organizing, 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 research, and conduct research that is relevant to the problems of today and the future.

Common Practice	CDO's Approach
Individual as the level of analysis.	Conduct research that uses the individual, group, and social network as the level of analysis.
Context doesn't have a meaningful impact on engagement.	We take the local context seriously, both from an electoral and a resource standpoint.
Demographic characteristics of the voter don't matter.	We do not believe that similarities in behavior across groups are "natural" but rather a political and historical product. We therefore consider how social position and power affect people's political engagement, along multiple dimensions.
Generalizability as normative whiteness.	We are not striving for generalizability and expect heterogeneous treatment effects from interventions. Our goal is not to flatten difference. Instead, we strive to understand it.
Predictive modeling largely assumes past is prologue.	We structure research to help us build the world we want to see, rather than simply taking the status quo at face value.
Deviation from white norm seen as irrational, rather than as a political and historical product.	Any disparities in behavior are understood to be the products of structural inequality, power differentials, and historic exclusion, not individual-level pathology.
Ground-level knowledge is devalued, while arcane technical knowledge is privileged.	We value knowledge on the ground more than the ability to develop complex algorithms or statistical analysis. We enter into our work with curiosity and humility.
Relationship between campaign and voter is short term and transactional. Little consideration of accountability after campaign has "won" the vote.	Our theory of change is that it is through relationships that we can shift power within the political system. One-time engagements are ineffective and, often, counter productive, particularly among low propensity voters of color.
Content of appeal largely seen as irrelevant.	Cultural competence is key and necessary for success.
Fostering substantive change in people's lives is almost never the focus – only winning.	Elections are meant to select leaders that will develop policies that address society's key problems. If an election does not lead to substantive, positive change in people's lives, then that is not "winning."

Bibliography

Alexander, Michelle. 2012. *THE NEW JIM CROW*. New York, NY: New Press.

Bedolla, L., & Andrade, J. (2017). The Invisible Hand of History: Pluralism, Power, and Inequality. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 50*(4), 1062-1067.

Cohen, Cathy J., Matthew D. Luttig, Vladimir E. Medenica, and Jon C. Rogowski. 2017. “Millennial Evaluations of Donald Trump and the Future of American Politics.” Genforward.

Crenshaw, K. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color". *STANFORD LAW REVIEW*. 43 (6): 1241.

Dahl, Robert Alan. 2007. *Polyarchy: participation and opposition.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dawson, Michael C. 2001. *Black visions: the roots of contemporary African-American political ideologies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Deverell, William. 2005. *Whitewashed adobe: the rise of Los Angeles and the remaking of its Mexican past*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press.

Emirbayer, Mustafa. "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology." *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (1997): 281-317.

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

File, Thom. 2017. “Voting in America: A Look at the 2016 General Election.” U.S. Census.

Gilens, M. (2015), Descriptive Representation, Money, and Political Inequality in the United States. Swiss Polit Sci Rev, 21: 222-228.

Gutiérrez, David G. 2007. *Walls and mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican immigrants, and the politics of ethnicity*. Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press.

Hancock, Ange-Marie. 2016. *Intersectionality: an intellectual history.* Cambridge: Oxford University Press.

Hero, Rodney E. *Latinos and the U.S. Political System: Two-Tiered Pluralism*. Temple University Press, 1992.

Ignatiev, Noel. 1995. *How the Irish became White*. New York: Routledge.

Igo, Sarah E. 2008. *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Jacobson, Matthew Frye. 1998. *Whiteness of a different color: European immigrants and the alchemy of race.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Lee, Taeku. “Somewhere Over the Rainbow? Post-Racial & Pan-Racial Politics in the Age of Obama.” *Daedalus*, vol. 140, no. 2, 2011, pp. 136–150.

Leonardo, Zeus. 2002. "The Souls of White Folk: Critical pedagogy, whiteness studies,

and globalization discourse". *Race Ethnicity and Education.* 5 (1): 29-50.

Masuoka, Natalie, and Jane Junn. 2013. *The politics of belonging: race, public opinion, and immigration*. Chicago, Ill: Univ. of Chicago Press.

McAdam, Doug. 1982. *Political process and the development of Black insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mouffe, Chantal. "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745-58.

Smith, Rogers M. 1999. *Civic ideals: conflicting visions of citizenship in U.S. history*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Zuberi, Tukufu, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. 2008. *White logic, white methods: racism and methodology.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

[i] Author's calculation based on data found at: https://electionstudies.org/resources/anes-guide/top-tables/?id=3