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Religiosity and Misperceptions: The Effect of Americans' Religious
Involvement on Their (Mis)perceptions of Political Parties

by

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Abstract: The effect of religious affiliation and religiosity on views of political issues is well established. In continuing scholarship on religions' interaction with politics, I look at the effect of religiosity and religious involvement on individuals' misperceptions of their partisan opposites. I am one of the first to use the "perception gap" metric developed by More In Common to quantify these misperceptions. I find that while no specific denominational involvement increases misperceptions, religiosity generally increases misperceptions Republicans hold of Democrats irrespective of denomination, and Catholicism moderates the misperceptions Democrats hold of Republicans. There was an unexpected overall lack of significance from religious traditions and religiosity, and I provide ways to investigate this in future research.

I. Introduction

In recent years American politics has become, as Jonathan Haidt puts it, “fragmented” as views of “the Constitution, American history, and economics” diverge along partisan lines (Haidt 2022). In addition to a division in politics, there is also increasing division between religious groups, notably the monolithic Evangelical and Black Protestant churches (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2018). Within religious groups, political division fractures traditions as recently epitomized by the splits in the United Methodist and Presbyterian (PC(USA)) churches (Goodstein 2014; Robertson and Dias 2020). Lastly, while politics is less and less communal and more professional, cooperative political behavior has diminished and given way to more expressive political behavior (Putnam 2001). So, Americans are in an increasingly divided country unable to talk to people from across the partisan divide, going to churches where their politics are unlikely to be challenged from the pulpit, and primarily focused on expressing their politics and not cooperating with others on political issues. These factors make research on American (mis)perceptions of political opposites from across the partisan divide timely, and in this study, I build an understanding of what factors yield misperceptions of other parties.

Negative polarization, also referred to as affective polarization, is the effect of an individual voting *against* one party instead of voting *for* another. Negative polarization particularly would be influenced by a false perception of the views of the “other side” or even just the “other” as an extreme perception would make one’s opposition greater when a party may not even hold the beliefs attributed to it. In a country with notable negative polarization, understating these perceptions is all the more important (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Iyengar et al. 2019). If negative partisanship is what drives some voters, understanding if these (mis)perceptions are accurate and what informs those perceptions is

particularly important for campaign professionals. Further, understanding independents' perceptions of both parties is also important for campaigns seeking to persuade them.

Research on the perception gap, that is the difference in what non-members of a party *think* that rival party members believe versus what its members *actually* believe, is important both to understand American civic society and the way campaigns should try to communicate with voters.

The perception gap is relatively a new measure of partisan misperceptions but is useful in assessing accuracy of perceptions and if misperceptions make another party appear more moderate or extreme to an individual. There are well developed feeling thermometers used to assess how people feel about different groups including political groups, but there is a similarly prevalent metric like the perception gap that can be used to quantitatively assess the accuracy of political perceptions. I expect religious involvement acts as a socializing institution on individuals' politics and as a result, affects their perceptions of political parties. I also expect religious traditions with strong political consensus increase perception gaps, while politically diverse traditions decrease the perception gap. This research is both some of the first into the perception gaps relationship with religiosity, and some of the first on the perception gap generally. I will lay out prior research upon which I build my theory, my methods for conducting this study, and analyze the results I find before providing some suggestions for future research into both the perception gap generally and the way religious involvement skews political perceptions.

II. Literature Review: Churches as Socializing Institutions

Political socialization is the phenomenon of individuals adopting civic ideas and ideologies from those around them from political learning and social circles (Niemi and Sobieszek 1977). This phenomenon is not unique to childhood like other types of socialization but continues through adulthood as experiences in the work place, new political and social movements, wars, and experiences with aging all inform the political knowledge base and experiences an individual works from (Sigel 1989). Additionally, civic engagement has an effect on individual's politics and their ideological views as "political information flows through social networks, and in these networks public life is discussed" (Putnam 2001, 338). Additionally, Putnam notes that churches offer an ideal platform to build civic skills and knowledge (2001, 339). Socializing experiences inform individuals views and their views of others, which makes socializing institutions, like churches, important to study in an understanding of people's perceptions of political parties. The effect of these socializing institutions is something I predict is significant on the perception gap.

Why do I use churches as opposed to, say, PTA involvement or membership in bowling leagues? Putman writes about the decline of civic ties in the United States, noting people tend to remain involved in churches even as involvement in other types of civic groups declines, although religious involvement does still follow national trends in community involvement (2001). In more recent research on social ties and community involvement, religious participation is the most prevalent over other groups including civic organizations (Lion's Clubs, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Kiwanis Clubs etc.), local organizations (PTAs, rotary clubs, neighborhood watches, etc.), and sports organizations (Weiss et al. 2019). Religious involvement still follows the broad trends in engagement seen in the other three groups, although it is notable the decline observed by Putnam appears to have slowed. There not substantial research on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on

religious involvement, but given the survey used in this research was conducted in 2018, the pandemic's effects are not a concern for this thesis.

There is a *long* history of religious groups having effects on American politics, from the religious diasporas that colonized New England, to the abolition and civil rights debates, the choice to enter World War II, and in recent years the debates around abortion and LGBT+ issues (Meyer 1988; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2018). It is well developed in literature the effect of religiosity and affiliation on issues outside of the simple bounds of “religious” issues including climate change and economic redistribution (Lowe et al. 2022; McCarthy et al. 2016). Further, there are the instances where religious traditions come into conflict with one another over political issues in the United States as happened in Pacific Northwest over the Iraq War, among other issues (Wellman 2008). The Evangelical Protestant church, particularly in the South, has played a central role in politics especially after the rise of the “Moral Majority” and while it is not true in every locality, these churches often have explicitly political teachings that their congregants act upon (Dochuk 2011). So, not only is religion one of the more prevalent civic ties individuals hold, it is also a tie that historically and today has influence on congregants’ politics or at bare minimum has congregations that sort on political lines.

The perception gap is a new idea from the organization More In Common who describes it as “the extent to which Republicans and Democrats think they disagree [versus] the amount they actually disagree.” It also measures perceptions of Democratic and Republican political views by independents (Yudkin, Hawkins, and Dixon 2019, 6). The metric exists to study what factors are affecting misperceptions of political opponents, which is how I apply it in this research by focusing on the effect of religious socialization and religiosity. What the initial report showed was ideology, partisanship, education, and

media consumption all had an effect. While I do not test the effect of media in this thesis, it would be feasible in future research. The report did not look at socializing institutions as a factor. The report also found a correlation between misperceptions and affective partisanship. Again, this is not a correlation I explore but is one that makes this study valuable as understanding what drives misperceptions can help build upon existing theories of what motivates voters with respect to affective partisanship.

III. Data and Methods

This study uses data collected by More in Common in November of 2018 surveying 2,100 American adults aged 18 to 90, with the median age being 50. The sample contains 818 Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, 960 Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, and 322 unaligned independents. As is usually the case, there are missing values for some of the variables in this study, and this is why the models used in this paper include fewer individuals than these total numbers. In controlling for the variables in the model, I anticipate results that will allow the effect of religiosity and religious affiliation to be isolated from exogenous effects like ideology, age, and education. Given my dependent variables have ranges of roughly 700 points, ordinary least squares regression analysis is appropriate.

As a general note, hereafter, when I refer to Democrats and Republicans, I am referring to both self-identified Democrats and Republicans as well as independents who self-identified as being “closer” to one party or the other. I group partisans with leaning independents due to research showing a tendency of leaning independents to be relatively indistinguishable from partisans (Klar 2014). This is also the way the data set groups these individuals for the perception gap questions.

Dependent variable

Republicans and Democrats were presented seven statements on issues like immigration, gun safety, and America's past and asked if they agree. These statements can be found in Appendix A and B. Using the sample in the survey, I can generate a percentage of how many Republicans or Democrats agree with each statement. Using Democrats as the group being studied, Republicans and Independents would also have been asked what percentage of Democrats they believed agreed with that statement. The difference in that expected percentage and the actual percentage is then calculated. The sum of the differences for all seven statements is lastly added together to form the perception gap metric. Republicans have the accuracy of their perceptions of Democrats measured, and vice versa. Independents have the accuracy of their perceptions of both Republicans and Democrats measured. This variable is a roughly 700-point scale that has both positive and negative values. A negative value represents that on net the individual believes the other party to be more moderate than they are. A positive value represents that the individual perceives the other party is more extreme in either the left or right direction, for Democrats and Republicans respectively, than they are. Descriptive statistics for these variables can be found in Table 1 I seek to explain the variations in American's misperceptions with these dependent variables. The kernel density plots for the perception gaps Democrats have of Republicans, and vice versa, are in Figure 1 and 2, respectively.

Independent Variables

Male: This dichotomous variable measures if an individual is male or female with a value of one representing a male individual. The coefficient would show the difference between male and female individuals.

Age: These variable measures age in years. As mentioned before, it ranges from 18 to 90. Age-squared is the squared value of age and is included in my models to capture any diminishing or exponential effects.

Education: This variable measures education on a six-point scale. A value of 0 represents less than a high school education and a value of 5 represents a professional or another post-graduate degree. Education-squared is the squared value of this variable and is included to capture any diminishing or exponential effect.

Family Income: This 16-point scale represents family income with a value of 0 equaling less than \$10,000 in family income and a value of 15 equaling more than \$550,000. Family Income-squared is the squared value of this variable and is included to estimate any diminishing or exponential effect.

Racial variables: These dichotomous variables show an individual's self-identified race. The excluded term is always non-Hispanic or Latino white individuals with the "other non-white" variable representing other non-white racial groups that had less than 30 individuals in a particular model. The coefficient will show the difference in the perception gap between white individuals and an individual of a given race.

Ideology: This 5-point scale shows an individual's self-identified political ideology, ranging from "very liberal" to "very conservative" across the scale. A value of 0 equals a "very liberal" individual and a value of 4 equals a "very conservative" individual.

Partisanship: For the four models of partisan individuals' perception gaps, this 3-point variable represents the strength of partisanship. There are separate versions of this variable for Democrats and Republicans. A value of 0 represents an independent who

identifies as being closer to the party in question and a value of 2 equals an individual who identifies as a “strong” Democrat or Republican.

Religious Affiliation: I will go into more detail on how I classified Protestant Christians, but all these variables are dichotomous with the excluded terms being non-religious individuals, which includes atheists or agnostic individuals. They represent an individual’s self-reported religious denomination or tradition with one representing those individuals affiliating with that denomination or tradition. The “other religion” variable represents all religious individuals whose affiliation had less than 30 individuals in a particular model.

Black Protestant: This variable equals one if an individual is both Black and Protestant. This is an inelegant way to measure the population that attends what we colloquially call “Black Protestant” churches. I will discuss this issue in my conclusion.

Evangelical Protestant: This variable equals one if an individual is Protestant, not Black, and self-identifies as “evangelical or born again.”

Mainline Protestant: This variable equals one if an individual is Protestant and is not part of the two immediately prior groups.

Roman Catholics: This variable equals one if an individual is Roman Catholic. I use the term Catholic interchangeably with Roman Catholic in this thesis.

Jewish: This variable equals one if an individual is religiously Jewish. I do not differentiate between different Jewish traditions.

Other Religion: In addition including to any of the other religious groups when micro-numerosity presented an issue, this variable also always equals one if an individual is Orthodox Christian, a Latter Day Saint, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or a religious “other.”

Religiosity: This variable is a factor score of an individual’s religious service/church attendance, frequency of prayer, and self-reported “importance” of religion in their daily life. This measure of belief (importance), belonging (frequency of attendance), and behavior (prayer) is consistent with contemporary research on religiosity and politics (see e.g., Driskell, Embry, and Lyon 2008; McCarthy, Olson, and Garand 2019; L. E. Smith and Walker 2013). This factor score ranges from -1.471 to 1.516 with a mean of 0 and a std. deviation of 1. A higher score represents greater religiosity.

Interactions: These interactions are designed to see if religiosity diminishes or amplifies the effect of an individual’s religious affiliation. Each interaction is calculated by multiplying the religiosity value by the given affiliation variable such that only those of the given religious group have the interaction measured for each variable. I estimate some models without interactions and some with interactions, with the goal of considering the differences between models with and without interactions.

IV. Hypothesized Results and Expectations

I mention in Section II research relating to both political socialization and the effect of civic engagement on individuals’ politics, specifically the effect that religious involvement can have. In coming to these hypotheses, I generally conclude that factors that might insulate an individual from dissenting political views are likely to skew their perception of other parties. While there is little published research to date about the perception gap, there are publicly available data and research on the relative homogeneity of political views across

racial, religious, and socio-economic groups (Doherty, Kiley, and Asheer 2020). Moreover, I also rely on the previously mentioned report published by More in Common that accompanied these data. This report is not peer-reviewed and is thus informative but not authoritative by any means. Nevertheless, it provides a starting point for this research. Lastly, I rely upon research showing homophily in social networks for many of these hypotheses (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). All hypothesized signs are in parentheses in Tables 2-5.

Beginning with the variables for sex, I expect being male to have a positive effect on the gap when perceiving Democrats and a negative effect when perceiving Republicans. This expectation is based in large part on the emerging gender gap in US voters' partisan leanings, with women favoring Democrats more than men (Doherty, Kiley, and Asheer 2020, 10). Given the gender gap in voting is still narrow, this effect would likely be small if significant.

With age, there is strong research to suggest age affects an individual's politics over time, with a diminishing effect in so far as individuals don't change their views much over time (Peterson, Smith, and Hibbing 2020). A lack of change is important for this research, as someone maintaining the same view over many years is likely to, over time, isolate themselves more and more from people with whom they disagree as research shows people tend to be friends with people who share their politics (Bahns, Pickett, and Crandall 2012). I would expect a positive but diminishing coefficient from age, diminishing because I expect the difference from 18 to 19 involves greater change than the difference from 89 to 90, but positive given the overall trend I lay out.

For the socioeconomic variables (education and income), I anticipate a relationship that is similar to the one identified in the original perception gap report that finds a

significant effect from education for Democrats even when controlling for income, gender, ideology, and age (Yudkin, Hawkins, and Dixon 2019). I expect having higher education and higher income to be correlated with a higher perception gap score for perceptions of both parties, with a diminishing effect for both. This expectation of a diminishing effect from education is informed by prior research showing a diminishing social effect from education in non-political areas and is consistent with the idea there is likely a significant difference between getting a college degree and not but a smaller difference between a bachelor's degree and a masters or professional degree. This is shown in the difference between no college and college graduate Democratic support than the difference between a bachelor's degree and college beyond that (Doherty, Kiley, and Asheer 2020). I would expect the effect of education to be weaker for perceptions of Democrats based on the perception gap report (Yudkin, Hawkins, and Dixon 2019).

With race, again my hypotheses are informed by the idea that individuals are friends with others like them, including racially similar individuals (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). I predict that someone part of the political majority in a relatively homogenous group will get a positive coefficient from race while someone in the minority would have a negative coefficient. For example, according to Pew Research, Black voters are 83% Democratic, and as result I predict a positive coefficient in perceptions of Republicans, and a negative coefficient in perceptions of Democrats. These predictions stem from the fact a Black individual is likely to have closer social ties with other Black individuals, who would likely be Democrats, so they would have an accurate perception of Democrats. But the lack of Black Republicans would lower the likelihood of close ties to a Republican, skewing their perceptions of Republicans. The "majority" is defined by the data from Pew Research (Doherty, Kiley, and Asheer 2020).

Ideology would be expected to have a positive coefficient for perceptions of Democrats. My argument is that individuals who are more conservative would be more likely to misperceive Democrats and/or have a greater misperception; moreover, individuals who are more liberal should be more likely to misperceive the positions of Republicans (Hawkins et al. 2019; Yudkin, Hawkins, and Dixon 2019). This is born out in the initial perception gap report, and data showing a strong correlation with ideology and partisan identity (R. B. Smith 1999). I expect ideology to play a strong role in the accuracy of individuals perceptions of political opposites or others.

For the four models of partisan individuals' perceptions of the other party, I anticipate that partisanship plays a positive role in their perception gap score for all conditions. Independents aren't partisan, so this variable is excluded from those models, and ideology likely plays a similar role to partisanship for them. Simply, strong Republicans and strong Democrats will be more likely to misperceive the positions of their political opponents. Again, I would reference research showing that individuals form bonds with people who hold similar beliefs as well as the general findings on civic interactions found by Putman (Bahns, Pickett, and Crandall 2012; Putnam 2001). The expectation is that people with stronger partisan identities will have stronger ties to people in their party, which would lead that social network to likely form a misperception of political opposites in addition to the endogenous tendencies of people who identify strongly with one party.

Evangelical and Black Protestants are perhaps the most prevalent religious groups involved in American Republican and Democratic politics, respectively. This trend towards each denomination having certain tendencies towards political involvement is borne out in demographic data of the US, which shows highly polarized religious tendencies (Doherty, Kiley, and Asheer 2020). This trend suggests that the more polarized denominations and

religious groups will have a positive effect on the perception gap when their members view the party that is underrepresented in their midst and a negative effect towards perceptions the majority group. Given the politically diverse views of Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics I predict a negative effect across all eight models for these two groups.

The coefficient for religiosity is difficult to predict on its own due to the exogenous effect of the religious affiliation of the individual; however, I predict a positive effect for this variable across all models. This hypothesis is informed by the idea that greater religiosity causes people to feel a closer connection to their place of worship, which would cause the effect of that place of worship to be magnified. The positive coefficient I initially mentioned for religiosity alone is due to the tendency of people to attend a religious institution that aligns with their politics (Gecewicz 2020; Wellman 2008). For interactions, I predict the same sign for the interaction as the sign of the coefficient of the group alone due to the likelihood that increased religiosity colors people's politics in light of their religious tradition. In other words, high levels of religiosity are likely to magnify the effects of a religious denomination on perceptions of the positions of the two political parties. This expectation of religiosity amplifying the effect of religious affiliation has shown to be true for Evangelical Protestants in prior research, although that research was not on perceptions of political parties (L. E. Smith and Walker 2013).

V. Results and Discussion of Findings

All eight models are significant at the 99% confidence level and explain between 9% and 26% of the variance in the perception gap. The models of Republican perceptions of Democrats explain the least variance and the models of independent perceptions of Democrats explain the most variance in the perception gap for those individuals. The two models of the Republican perception gap of Democrats and the two models of the

Democratic perception gap of Republicans were all suffering from heteroskedasticity and thus have been reestimated using robust standard errors to correct for the issue. The four models of independents passed the Breusch-Pagan test and hence no correction for heteroskedasticity is necessary. Otherwise, models are the best linear unbiased estimation of the given dependent variable with the included independent variables. The full results are presented in Tables 2-5. When the coefficient is in the same direction as the predicted sign, a one-tailed test was employed. When the coefficient ran in the opposite direction from the predicted sign, I employ the same threshold for significance as a two-tailed test.

Religious denomination tells a complicated story. In the small number of cases when religious denomination coefficients are statistically significant, they always have a negative coefficient, indicating a lower level of misperception. This runs counter to my expectations of religious groups being a place for an echo-chamber of partisans that warps perceptions and instead suggests congregants are leaving with a better understanding of people who are their partisan rivals. Most striking was that the coefficient for Evangelical Protestantism is never significant for Republican's perceptions of Democrats—this is a variable that was a key motivator in doing this research. Beyond that, the fact that the coefficient for Catholicism alone, even before its interaction with religiosity, is significant in three of the models suggests there may be some validity to the theory that politically diverse traditions help alleviate misperceptions or make more moderate perceptions of political “others.” Democratic Jews also have more accurate/moderate perceptions of Republicans in a model with the interactions, a similarly interesting trend to that of Democratic Catholics. This is counter to my hypotheses. It is notable Republican Catholics don't have significant coefficients like their Democratic counterparts. There were too few Republican Jews in the sample for them to make up their own group.

Religiosity is a significant predictor of Republicans' misperceptions of Democrats' positions in the model without interactions. While the results for Evangelical Protestants are surprising, they suggest that it doesn't matter what tradition a Republican belongs to, if they feel like they belong, behave religiously, and believe religion is important to them, they perceive Democrats as being more extreme than they are. However, when including interactions, no religiosity or religious affiliation variables are significant.

The only model in which the interaction of religiosity was significant was the model of Democratic perceptions of Republicans. This interaction was significant for Roman Catholics and those in the "other" category in the same direction as the variable just for affiliation with these traditions. However, this significance does not actually represent a significant change in the expected perceptions from Catholics. The graph of the predicted values for Catholics from the religiosity model against the predicted values for Catholics, by religiosity, from the model without the interaction to best demonstrate the amplifying effect religiosity has on the trend already there for Catholics (Figure 4). However, even this amplifying effect doesn't represent a significant change—the confidence intervals still substantially overlap for every value of religiosity. This is inconsistent with my expectations for this variable and the overall lack of significance for the interactions—and the lack of significance for the religious identity variables generally is also inconsistent with what I predicted.

The coefficient for partisanship is significant only for Republicans' perceptions of Democrats, and in this case the coefficient is in the opposite direction predicted at the 95% confidence level. This is perhaps the most unexpected result from my models. I would have expected that stronger partisanship would yield a greater misperception, but for Republicans it apparently has the opposite effect. I have no strong explanation for this

finding, theoretical or otherwise, but it is certainly a fascinating question for future study if this pattern was replicated in future studies of perception. The only hypothesis I can muster to explain this is that strong partisans may have greater political knowledge overall yielding a more accurate perception of their opponents, so controlling for political knowledge may alleviate this trend. This is an avenue I would consider in future study.

The coefficients for ideology are significant in at the 95% confidence level in six of the models. This finding backs up the finding in the Perception Gap Report from More in Common and is consistent with theoretical expectations. For Republican perceptions of Democratic positions, political ideology is positively related to the perception gap, with conservatives more likely to correctly perceive the positions of Democrats and moderate and liberal Republicans. For Democratic perceptions of Republican positions, the opposite is observed: the coefficient for political ideology is negative, indicating that liberal Democrats are more likely to misperceive the positions of Republicans than moderate and conservative Democrats. It appears that strong ideological positioning fosters misperceptions for both Democrats and Republicans. These findings are mirrored for the two parties as expected (see: Figure 3). Finally, among Independents, political ideology is negatively related to misperceptions only of Republicans, suggesting conservative independents have more accurate perceptions of Republicans, while there is no significant effect of ideology on independent misperceptions of Democrats.

The coefficient for age was significant at the 95% confidence level in models of Republican misperceptions of Democrats in the hypothesized direction as was its diminishing effect over time. This suggests that there is at least some effect of older age in reinforcing misperceptions for Republicans, with a diminishing effect year over year. Interestingly, socio-economic variables were not significant in any of the models. The lack of

significance from these variables is surprising and runs counter to some mainstream beliefs about universities as perception-skewing institutions. There is a chance the effect of education is significant for young people who aren't as removed from their university experience, but this is purely conjecture on my part.

The only models in which no race variable had a significant effect were the models of Republican perceptions of Democrats. I would preliminarily attribute this to micro-numerosity, as there were only 42 Hispanic Latino Republicans and 50 other non-white voters in the sample. I would anticipate with a larger sample of racial minorities that race would play a significant role in Republican perceptions of Democrats. For the Democratic perceptions of Republicans, the coefficient for Blacks was negative and significant at the 95% level in both models, in contrast to my hypothesis; this indicates that Black Democrats were less likely than white Democrats to misperceive the positions of Republicans. This challenges my hypothesis on racial political homogeneity being an explanatory factor for perception gaps. It is also worth noting that both Hispanics and other non-white Democrats have lower propensities to misperceive the positions of Republicans. For independents, any significant racial variable was significant in the hypothesized direction which would suggest empirical support for my hypotheses.

The models of Democratic perceptions of Republicans were the only models with a significant constant. The constants' significance is likely a result of the excluded ideology term being "very liberal," and in a model where ideology is significant and has a relatively high coefficient, ideology's effect on the constant is not out of line with expectations. It is notable there would be this significant effect for Democrats but not for Republicans where a negative constant could have been significant for the same reason.

VI. Conclusions and Future Research Directions

I would posit there are a few issues with this approach at measuring misperceptions, but the way the metric is calculated is useful. In a country with 50 different states each with their own political parties, understanding the aggregate view of every Democrat and every Republican isn't feasible or something I think we should expect from voters. Apart from the Presidency, every other office elected by voters is statewide or smaller, so politics is primarily happening within state borders and not across them. Even if issues are nationalized, politicians still represent local constituencies and are accountable to state or local parties and generally not to a national party. Looking a variation across state lines helps capture, at least in part, some of the variation between rural and urban states and variation between different regions, like the sunbelt and rustbelt. To that end, voters in Louisiana don't choose from an average American Republican or average American Democrat. They choose from a Louisiana Democrat and a Louisiana Republican who will likely have views that differ from their national party. If voters are acting on negative partisanship, where their perceptions of the other party do matter, they likely aren't acting on negative partisanship with reference to the *national* parties but with reference to the more local parties. In doing this type of study again I would rather look at the perception gaps of, for example, Louisiana Republican misperceptions of Louisiana Democrats and vice versa. I would even suggest going even more local than state lines; San Diego notably had a Republican Mayor from 2014 to 2020 while consistently voting for Democratic Presidents in that time (Politico 2016, 2021). Investigating how well San Diego Republicans and Democrats understand and accurately perceive the views of the other party should give a more accurate understanding of what voters are voting on at their local polling place, rather than looking at a national sample. This local approach would also allow for the study of what socializing institutions are important in some localities versus others. For example,

in the Bible Belt, maybe religiosity's interaction with Evangelical Protestantism would be significant but it isn't significant in New England.

In looking at the effect of political socialization, even mid to late-life political socialization, in churches and other religious institutions I don't think looking at pure denomination is the best way to go about it. I think it is certainly an interesting method, but I would rather a poll ask voters if they attend a "Republican majority, Democratic majority, or politically mixed" church. First, this would provide more information on if people are going to churches with the same politics as them. Second, I think this method would be more accurate in gauging the effect of church affiliation and religiosity on perceptions of political opponents. Additionally, when looking at Black Protestants, it would be better to ask Protestants if they attend a "majority Black" church as opposed to the method I use in this paper. The significance of some religious affiliations suggests there are ways that religiosity and religious affiliation affect perceptions of political others. I believe I've laid out a better way to measure that effect for future research.

In the future I would also be interested in the effect of an individual's personal network on their perceptions of political opposites. Asking people about the partisan composition of their close friends and how often they discuss politics with their friends, and then looking at the interaction of those two variables, could yield results showing the effect of socialization in friend groups on political perceptions.

Lastly, I think the statements used to judge the perception gap in the future should be different. Keeping the number of statements at seven, as More In Common used, I would ask three economic questions; for example: one question about taxes, one about government spending, and one about the role of government regulation in the market. I would then ask three social questions; for example: one question about LGBT+ issues, one about abortion,

and one about racial issues like affirmative action. Lastly, I would ask an attitudinal question like question five in Appendix A and question seven in Appendix B. I think these questions would allow researchers to look at specific perception gaps around economic and social issues, and make sure the overall perception gap is a broader spectrum of issues than this metric, which only asked one economic question of the 14 it asked.

Understanding the misperceptions Americans have about the two parties is important for political scientists when we study American voting habits and negative partisanship. For campaigns it is important for when they seek to persuade voters, particularly independents. These misperceptions lead to Americans talking past each other as they are debating against a party that doesn't hold the views as universally as they allege. A better understanding of the perception gap and the ways it is enhanced and diminished by individuals' behaviors and social affiliations will be important as politics continues to be dominated in the US by two parties and people are motivated by disagreement with one party as much as they are motivated by agreement with a candidate's positions. This thesis provides a starting point for investigating these effects, and I have laid out additional refinements to create a more effective measure of misperception for future research using this novel measure.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Perception Gaps (P-gap)

	Min.	Max.	Mean	Median
Dems. P-gap of Reps.	-241	453	128.377	170
Reps. P-gap of Dems.	-201	492	213.299	247
Ind. P-gap of Reps.	-239	445	87.395	88.5
Ind. P-gap of Dems.	-185	495	170.771	145.5

Table 2: Regression Output of Models of Republican Perception Gap of Democrats

	b ₁	se ₁	z ₁	b ₂	se ₂	z ₂
Demographics						
Male (+)	17.021	16.646	1.02	18.150	16.621	1.09
Age (+)	5.940	2.703	2.20*	5.691	2.773	2.05*
Age ² (-)	-0.057	0.026	-2.22*	-0.055	0.027	-2.05*
Education (+)	3.059	26.873	0.11	0.789	27.317	0.03
Education ² (-)	-0.766	4.801	-0.16	-0.314	4.880	-0.06
Family Income (+)	3.499	8.837	0.40	4.702	8.858	0.53
Family Income ² (+)	0.290	0.633	0.46	0.178	0.639	0.28
Race						
Hispanic or Latino (+/-)	32.223	34.403	0.94	31.455	33.912	0.93
Other Non-White (+/-)	29.206	37.402	0.78	21.829	38.826	0.56
Political Attributes						
Ideology (+)	40.505	10.587	3.83**	40.699	10.594	3.84**
Partisanship (+)	-20.581	9.982	-2.06*	-20.590	10.004	-2.06*
Religious Affiliation						
Mainline Protestant (-)	9.425	28.422	0.33	4.218	30.110	0.14
Evangelical Protestant (+)	-11.460	27.081	-0.42	-24.087	33.296	-0.72
Roman Catholic (-)	-31.438	26.617	-1.18	-22.912	27.993	-0.82
Other Religion (+/-)	-98.632	55.083	-1.79	-100.081	53.928	-1.86
Religiosity (+)	24.547	12.136	2.02*	29.389	19.060	1.54
Interaction of Religiosity on:						
Mainline Protestant (-)	—	—	—	5.175	40.124	0.13

Evangelical Protestant (+)	—	—	—	4.722	29.383	0.16
Roman Catholic (-)	—	—	—	-36.897	32.260	-1.14
Other Religion (+/-)	—	—	—	45.479	42.498	1.07
Constant	-62.770	84.895	-0.74	-56.901	86.476	-0.66

N ₁	437	N ₂	437
R ₁ ²	0.0906	R ₂ ²	0.098
F ₁	3.45	F ₂	3.34
Prob(F ₁)	0.0000**	Prob(F ₂)	0.0000**

*- 95% significance

** - 99% significance

Table 3: Regression Output of Models of Democratic Perceptions of Republicans

	b ₁	se ₁	z ₁	b ₂	se ₂	z ₂
Demographics						
Male (-)	12.931	14.594	0.89	11.179	14.764	0.76
Age (+)	1.553	2.636	0.59	1.828	2.655	0.69
Age ²	-0.018	0.026	-0.71	-0.020	0.026	-0.78
Education (+)	-28.721	22.692	-1.27	-26.646	22.443	-1.19
Education ² (-)	8.579	3.976	2.16*	8.428	3.940	2.14*
Family Income (+)	11.294	8.281	1.36	11.535	8.196	1.41
Family Income ² (-)	-0.997	0.727	-1.37	-0.992	0.715	-1.39
Race						
Black (+)	-108.322	33.527	-3.23**	-115.379	33.333	-3.46**
Hispanic or Latino (+/-)	-75.141	24.232	-3.10**	-77.043	24.399	-3.16**
Other Non-White (+/-)	-83.164	36.929	-2.25*	-89.140	36.455	-2.45*
Political Attributes						
Ideology (-)	-53.452	9.238	-5.79**	-55.882	9.278	-6.02**
Partisanship (+)	-12.641	9.118	-1.39	-14.290	9.179	-1.56
Religious Affiliation						
Mainline Protestant	2.863	28.711	0.10	-14.589	30.828	-0.47
Evangelical Protestant (-)	3.159	32.513	0.10	-55.437	48.366	-1.15
Black Protestant (+)	-46.324	38.676	-1.20	-68.584	43.367	-1.58
Roman Catholic (-)	-63.281	23.335	-2.71**	-78.234	25.029	-3.13**
Jewish(+)	-57.368	31.791	-1.80	-74.328	37.135	-2.00*
Other Religion (+/-)	-3.656	45.012	-0.08	-48.455	39.292	-1.23
Religiosity (+)	0.046	10.340	0.00	21.146	15.210	1.39

Interaction of Religiosity on:

Mainline Protestant (-)	—	—	—	-33.605	32.539	-1.03
Evangelical Protestant (-)	—	—	—	29.210	47.623	0.61
Black Protestant (+)	—	—	—	-9.930	33.452	-0.30
Roman Catholic (-)	—	—	—	-45.286	26.087	-1.74*
Jewish	—	—	—	2.321	39.762	0.06
Other Religion (+/-)	—	—	—	-117.911	35.780	-3.30**
Constant	204.731	73.290	2.79**	218.628	75.114	2.91**

N ₁	636	N ₂	636
R ₁ ²	0.2347	R ₂ ²	0.2455
F ₁	14.07	F ₂	11.18
Prob(F ₁)	0.0000**	Prob(F ₂)	0.0000**

*- 95% significance

**- 99% significance

Table 4: Regression Output of Models of Independent Perceptions of Republicans

	b ₁	se ₁	z ₁	b ₂	se ₂	z ₂
Demographics						
Male (-)	11.539	26.834	0.43	9.753	27.093	0.36
Age (+)	8.010	5.166	1.55	8.014	5.220	1.54
Age ² (-)	-0.085	0.054	-1.58	-0.085	0.054	-1.56
Education (+)	29.503	40.739	0.72	26.930	40.995	0.66
Education ² (-)	-9.295	7.808	-1.19	-8.891	7.858	-1.13
Family Income (+)	25.379	13.534	1.88	23.837	13.735	1.74*
Family Income ² (-)	-1.739	1.194	-1.46	-1.619	1.209	-1.34
Race						
Black (+)	94.271	56.032	1.68*	104.927	57.675	1.82*
Hispanic or Latino (+/-)	-74.996	42.214	-1.78	-74.372	43.054	-1.73
Other Non-White (+/-)	110.434	44.264	2.49*	108.002	44.986	2.40*
Ideology (-)	-57.704	15.826	-3.65**	-56.099	16.137	-3.48**
Religious Affiliation						
Mainline Protestant (-)	-0.343	54.530	-0.01	-2.178	56.299	-0.04
Evangelical Protestant (-)	-3.766	48.861	-0.08	15.575	74.730	0.21
Catholic (-)	-74.791	37.626	-1.99*	-59.585	40.789	-1.46
Other Religion (+/-)	-91.819	60.560	-1.52	-79.035	61.885	-1.28
Religiosity (+)	-6.020	16.955	-0.36	-21.145	23.684	-0.89
Interaction of Religiosity on:						
Mainline Protestant (-)	—	—	—	89.381	61.913	1.44
Evangelical Protestant (-)	—	—	—	8.560	64.269	0.13

Catholic (-)	—	—	—	33.893	43.822	0.77
Other Religion (+/-)	—	—	—	-4.202	52.703	-0.08
Constant	-5.616	127.187	-0.04	-13.660	128.700	-0.11

N ₁	164	N ₂	164
R ₁ ²	0.2248	R ₂ ²	0.2382
F ₁	2.66	F ₂	2.24
Prob(F ₁)	0.001**	Prob(F ₂)	0.0034**

*- 95% significance

** - 99% significance

Table 5: Regression Output of Models of Independent Perceptions of Democrats

	b ₁	se ₁	z ₁	b ₂	se ₂	z ₂
Demographics						
Male (+)	19.940	29.684	0.67	20.360	30.315	0.67
Age (+)	4.702	5.750	0.82	4.859	5.866	0.83
Age ² (-)	-0.042	0.061	-0.69	-0.043	0.062	-0.70
Education (+)	52.812	46.583	1.13	55.360	47.367	1.17
Education ² (-)	-10.566	8.795	-1.20	-11.020	8.936	-1.23
Family Income (+)	1.767	17.332	0.10	1.989	17.641	0.11
Family Income ² (-)	-0.647	1.596	-0.41	-0.676	1.622	-0.42
Race						
Black (-)	-113.994	52.772	-2.16*	-118.548	54.228	-2.19*
Hispanic or Latino (+/-)	-39.257	45.026	-0.87	-35.716	46.269	-0.77
Other Non-White (+/-)	120.574	49.035	2.46*	125.072	50.118	2.50*
Ideology (+)	25.464	18.467	1.38	25.401	18.994	1.34
Religious Affiliation						
Mainline Protestant (-)	-121.033	62.608	-1.93*	-109.823	66.268	-1.66
Evangelical Protestant (+)	47.766	57.811	0.83	22.956	81.103	0.28
Roman Catholic (-)	-12.482	40.330	-0.31	-15.334	47.166	-0.33
Other Religion (+/-)	21.096	62.507	0.34	18.169	66.162	0.27
Religiosity (+)	-4.359	20.030	-0.22	-2.883	31.032	-0.09
Effect of Religiosity on:						
Mainline Protestant (-)	—	—	—	-50.248	67.463	-0.74
Evangelical Protestant (+)	—	—	—	18.936	68.557	0.28

Roman Catholic (-)	—	—	—	-6.865	52.716	-0.13
Other Religion (+/-)	—	—	—	25.088	60.420	0.42
Constant	-30.751	151.762	-0.20	-36.566	154.539	-0.24

N ₁	125	N ₂	125
R ₁ ²	0.2559	R ₂ ²	0.2634
F ₁	2.32	F ₂	1.86
Prob(F ₁)	0.0056**	Prob(F ₂)	0.0233*

*- 95% significance

** - 99% significance

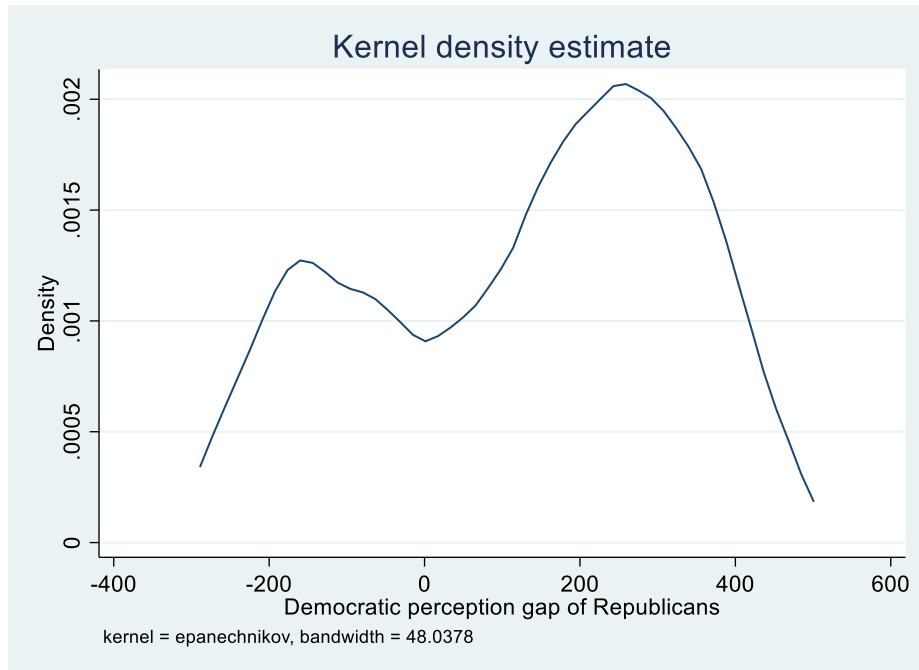
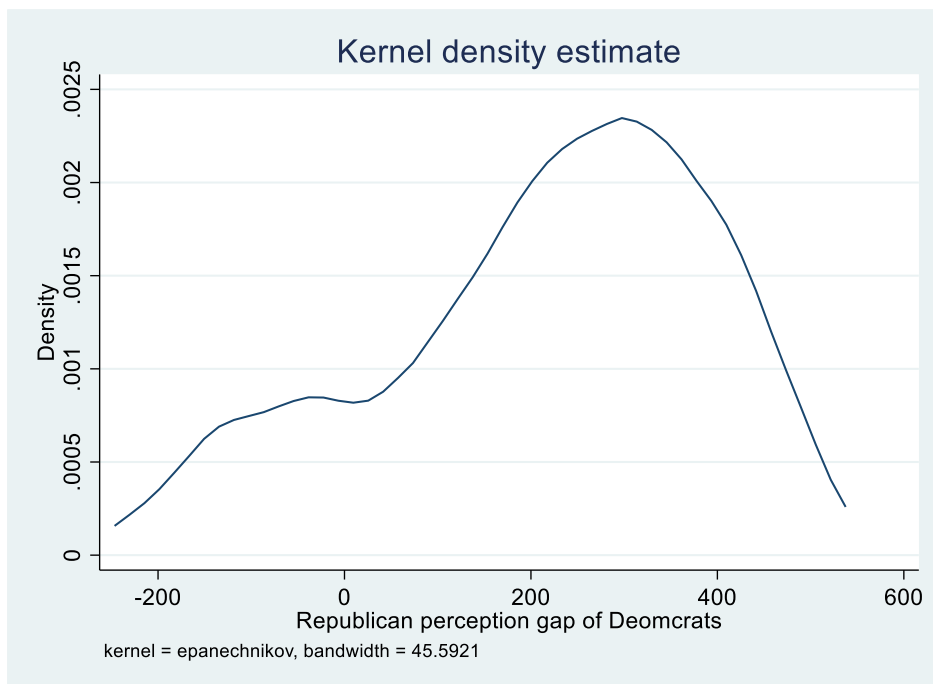
Figure 1: Democratic Perception Gap of Republican Kernel Density Plot**Figure 2: Democratic Perception Gap of Republican Kernel Density Plot**

Figure 3: Partisan's Perception Gaps by Ideology Based on Predictions from the Models Including Interactions with 95% Confidence Intervals

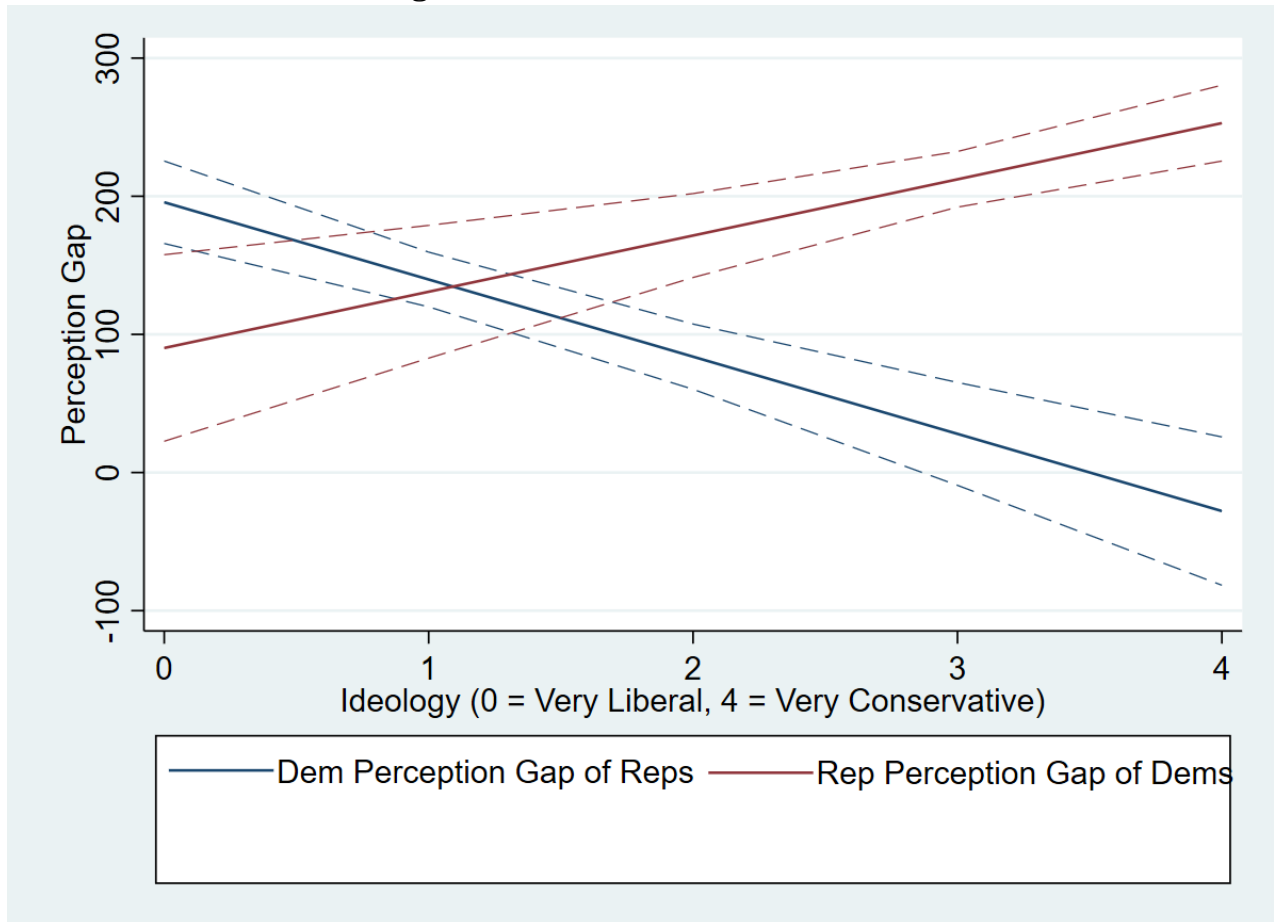
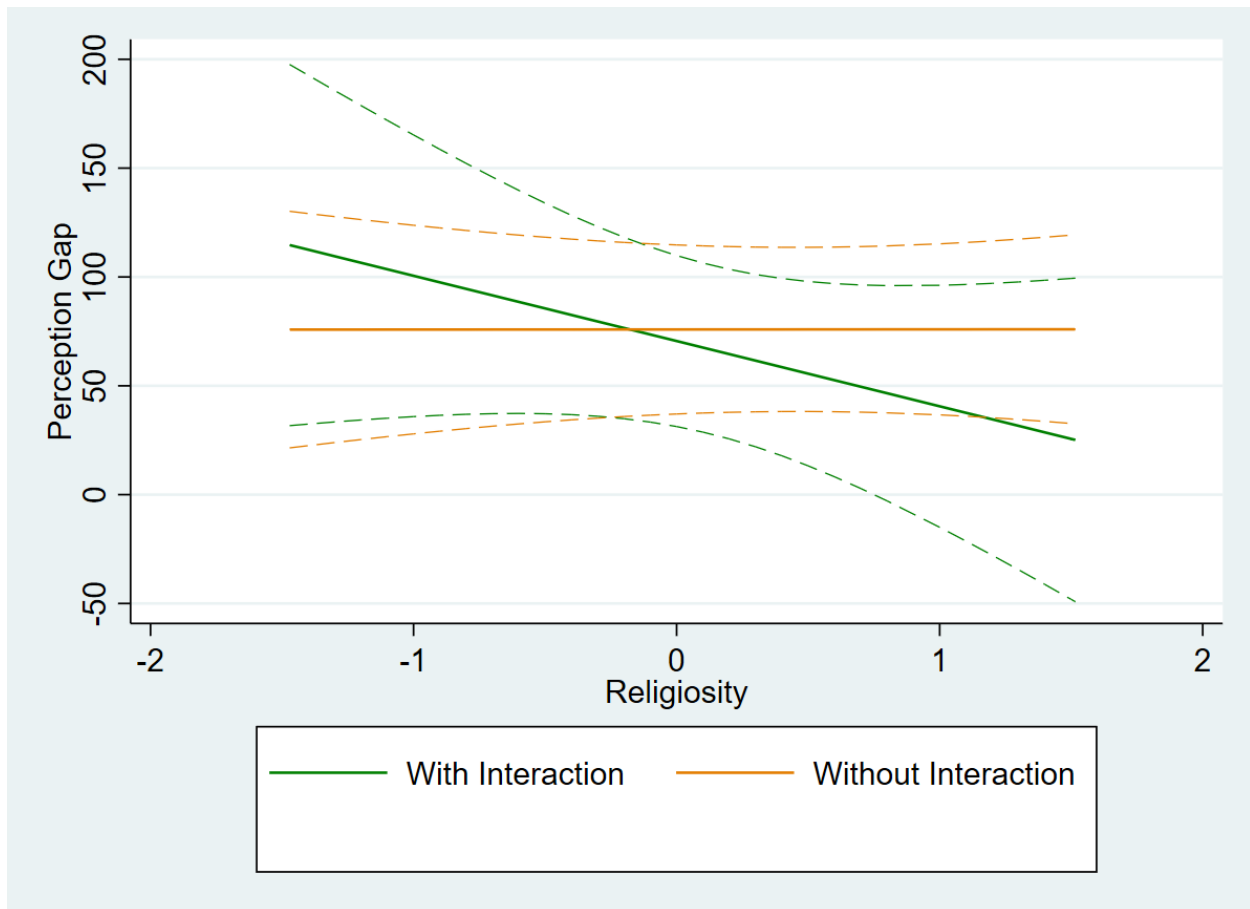


Figure 4: Democratic Roman Catholic Perception Gaps of Republicans by Religiosity with and without the Interaction of Religiosity and Catholicism with 95% Confidence Intervals



Appendix A: Perception Gap Questions Asked to Democrats and Independents about Republicans

What percentage of Republican voters do you think believe that...

1. Properly controlled immigration can be good for America
2. Racism still exists in America
3. People are right to be concerned about how climate change might affect us
4. The government should do more to stop guns from getting into the hands of bad people
5. Donald Trump is a flawed person
6. Many Muslims are good Americans
7. Sexism still exists in America

*Note: the scores from these questions were flipped such that an answer of 100 from a Democrat or Independent would represent an extreme perception of Republicans on the given question.

Appendix B: Perception Gap Questions Asked to Republicans and Independents about Democrats

What percentage of Democratic voters do you think believe that...

1. The US should have completely open borders
2. The US should abolish ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement)
3. Most police are bad people
4. America should become a socialist country
5. Law abiding citizens should have the right to bear firearms
6. It is important that men are protected from false accusations pertaining to sexual assault
7. I am proud to be American though I acknowledge my country's flaws

*Note: the scores from these questions were flipped in some cases such that an answer of 100 from a Republican or Independent would represent an extreme perception of Democrats on the given question.

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