

How long does it take to admit that you do not know? Gender differences in response time to political knowledge questions

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Abstract

The implications of the persistent gender gap in political knowledge are a puzzle that the literature is still disentangling; and research has evidenced important differences in the way women and men respond to survey questions. We argue in this article that political knowledge survey items not only inform about differences in cognition but also about other latent traits related to gender stereotyping. Gender stereotypes around political knowledge push men to be knowledgeable but not so much women, which we expect to affect men and women's survey responses differently. To test this expectation, we explore response times of do not know answers to political knowledge items. Our results show that men, particularly those who declare being interested in politics, take longer than women to admit that they do not know the answer to political knowledge items.

Keywords

political knowledge, do not know, gender gap, response time, stereotypes

Introduction

For some time now, the literature on political knowledge (PK) has evidenced important differences in the way women and men respond to survey questions (Dolan, 2011; Dolan and Hansen, 2020; Ferrín et al., 2018; Fortin-Rittberger and Ramstetter, 2021; Jerit and Barabas, 2017). The best-known is that women are more likely than men to answer “Do not know” to political knowledge items (Mondak and Anderson, 2004). Some authors have suggested that this is a byproduct of women's higher risk aversion which in turn leads them to guess less than men (Ferrín et al., 2017; Lizotte and Sidman, 2009). However, women may also be more likely to answer that they do not know because this is the image that existing gender stereotypes depict for them.

Recent research has indeed found that gender stereotypes in politics strengthen the gender bias in political knowledge survey items (Pereira, 2019). Building on it, we argue that measurements of political knowledge contain latent traits other than cognition about politics that differ for women and men. Since politics is still perceived as a “men's game,” we

hypothesize that existing social stereotypes expect men to be knowledgeable about politics but not women (Pereira, 2019). Consequently, compared to women, men should feel higher social pressure to correctly answer PK questions or, at least, guess. Do not know responses would become an admission of ignorance and, to a certain extent, a transgression of social norms, particularly amongst men who declare high levels of political motivation. In contrast, gender stereotypes expect women to be less politically involved. Consequently, they tend to engage less with questions about a domain in which they do not feel welcome (Ihme and Tausendpfund, 2018).

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To test our expectations empirically, we use response time (RT) to uncover gender biases in responses to political knowledge items. We focus on response latencies of “Do not know” (DK) answers of women and men to political knowledge questions. Using an online survey conducted in Spain and administered to a representative sample of Internet users, we find support for our argument. Men take significantly longer than women to respond that they do not know an answer. Furthermore, within men, those who declare themselves as interested in politics take longer to choose DK responses than those who are uninterested. Our contribution is twofold. We provide evidence of how gender stereotypes affect both men and women, burdening them with the unease of complying with standards they may or may not identify with, both as politically knowledgeable or ignorant. This finding further contributes to the public opinion literature regarding the equivalence of generalized indicators across sexes.

The gender gap in political knowledge: What can response times tell us?

Women being less knowledgeable about politics than men is an extant finding in the scholarly literature (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 2005; Fortin-Rittberger, 2016). Yet, some scholars have also shown that existing measures of political knowledge may be biased. On the one hand, current measures of PK overrepresent men’s interests (Dolan, 2011; Stolle and Gidengil, 2010), further inflating the gender gap. On the other, the format of the PK survey items itself, normally as closed-ended questions, also results in gender-biased measurements. Some authors suggest that a higher propensity to risk aversion would increase women’s likelihood of providing “Do not know” answers (Lizotte and Sidman, 2009), while men are more likely to avoid DK and guess (Ferrín et al., 2017). Correcting for guessing has been found to compensate and cancel gender differences (Cor and Sood, 2016).

Another plausible explanation explores research on potential problems of equivalence of political knowledge survey items for women and men and how the topic and the format of such items originate gender biases. However, stereotype threat, political motivation, and social desirability remain largely unexplored (Davis and Silver, 2003; Pereira, 2019). Survey research has found that priming respondents to think of social identities that are stereotyped as knowledgeable enhances respondents’ performance in knowledge items (Gibson et al., 2014; McGlone et al., 2006; Shih et al., 1999).

In the political domain, knowing about politics can be understood as a “social obligation,” a duty of responsible citizens in any democracy. Yet, social desirability in relation to political survey questions is highly stereotyped in terms

of social identities such as gender or race (Davis and Silver, 2003). Politics is generally perceived as a men’s game (see, e.g., Kittilson, 2016; Lawless and Fox, 2010; Paxton et al., 2007), and thus women are not expected to be active or knowledgeable. Women’s involvement being constantly reported as lower than men’s (amongst others Hooghe and Stolle 2004; Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010) further encourages their disconnection from the political realm. Stereotype activation in PK surveys has indeed been found to decrease women’s performance in political knowledge tests (Ihme and Tausendpfund, 2018; McGlone et al., 2006). Women have a lower motivation to be politically knowledgeable than men, or at least appear to, because it is their gender-conforming behavior. As a consequence, priming respondents to think about politics as a male-dominated domain reinforces women’s likelihood to answer DK to political knowledge items (Pereira, 2019). Nonetheless, stereotype threat has also been found to affect men when they are primed to think that they may not meet expected standards (Aronson et al., 1999). To date, the scant evidence has focused on gender differences in the likelihood of providing a DK answer based on stereotyping and/or priming. However, there is little knowledge about potential latent traits in the do not know answers to political knowledge items, when respondents are not directly primed to think on specific stereotypes. We analyze response latencies to uncover these potential traits.

Response time (RT) becomes a valuable source of information in survey analysis, as it can measure latent traits, such as attitude accessibility, cognitive effort, or social desirability. Quicker responses are usually related to attitude accessibility and strength (Fazio, 2001; Huckfeldt et al., 1999; Johnson, 2004; Meyer and Schoen, 2014; Miller and Peterson, 2004; Mondak and Huckfeldt, 2006) and low cognitive efforts (Höhne et al., 2017). Response time of incorrect and “non-substantive” answers has been found to be larger than response time of correct answers (Draisma and Dijkstra, 2004; Yan and Tourangeau, 2008), which again is correlated to attitude accessibility, as well as to the amount of cognitive effort exerted by respondents.

Most important for this article is research on the relationship between social desirability and latency. On the one hand, low latencies could imply that responses are given to be socially acceptable, not a true depiction of the respondent. In this regard, satisficing implies less cognitive effort and a shorter response time to survey questions (Andersen and Mayerl, 2017; Krosnick, 1991). In contrast, Turner et al. (2015) find that respondents editing their responses in this way tend to have higher latencies. Respondents’ motivation seems to play an important role in mediating satisficing and, thus, response times (Krosnick, 1991; Yan and Tourangeau, 2008).

In this article we focus on response times of DK answers, since they display the largest gap between men and women

and have been pointed out as one of the key components of the gender gap repeatedly observed in political knowledge. We contend that response times may vary when respondents are unsure or do not know the correct answer, reflecting different latent traits for women and men. Combining the literature studies on stereotyping and response latencies, it is reasonable to expect that stereotype threat leads to gendered differences in responses and motivations regarding DK answers as it affects the motivation to learn, working memory, and willingness to exert cognitive effort (Pereira, 2019; Smith, 2004). Since gender roles expect men to be knowledgeable, but not women, the latter have less inhibitions than the first to admit that they do not know an answer instead of guessing (Lizotte and Sidman 2009; Fraile 2014). This could reflect a satisficing behavior on their behalf. The time used by women to answer DK should be smaller for women than for men, as DK is not a “socially sanctioned” answer for women. To the contrary, if surveys convey politics as highly masculinized, even if they do so inadvertently (Pereira, 2019; Sturgis and Smith, 2010), men should feel pressured to give a substantive answer to political knowledge questions (and potentially, guess) and reluctance to use the DK option. Stereotypes would pressure men—especially high interested men—to provide a substantive response, leading them to take longer to answer that they do not know. We hypothesize that *men’s response latencies in answering DK are larger than women’s* (H1) and that *men’s DK response latencies will be more strongly moderated by political motivation than women’s* (H2).

Data and method

We test our hypothesis in Spain. As a reference regarding gender stereotyping, with 72 out of 100 points, Spain ranks 8th in the EU on the Gender Equality Index (www.eige.europa.eu). In particular, we use an online survey with a representative sample of the Spanish Internet users conducted during November 23, 2015 and December 3, 2015.¹ The online survey is restricted to individuals aged 18 or older, and the sample has been stratified with quotas of the Spanish population by geographical areas, age group, and gender. 1,501 people were interviewed (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File for a comparison of the survey to a sample of a nationally representative face-to-face survey fielded during the same period).² Online surveys increase the probabilities of respondents cheating, compared to face-to-face questionnaires (Burnett, 2016; Clifford and Jerit, 2016; Höhne et al., 2020; Style and Jerit, 2020), providing further support to our decision of focusing on DK responses. Building on previous studies (e.g., Hansen and Pedersen, 2014), we measure political knowledge through 19 items covering a broad number of topics (see Table A2 in the Supplementary Information File). This resulted in an exhaustive measure of PK, including facts

about the functioning of the election, candidates, and party positions on precise policy proposals. To maximize the quality of the political knowledge scale and discourage cheating, we implemented four measures: (1) A short introduction was presented to the respondents reminding them that there were not being graded and any answer was acceptable; (2) a time limit was imposed in each of the questions to 30 or 40 s depending on the length of the wording (Clifford and Jerit 2016). Once the time ran out, the next question appeared in the screen and respondents could not return to the preceding question; (3) different formats (namely, closed-ended questions with different number of categories, pictures, and click and drag questions) have been employed throughout the questionnaire to avoid respondents’ fatigue³ and limit potential response biases and cheating related to question format (Bullock and Rader, 2021); and (4) the items had varying levels of difficulty (percentage of correct responses ranges from 7.8% to 88.8%).

The dependent variable is the response time, registered for each of the political knowledge items using a latent timer. Response latency is measured as the average amount of time (seconds) used by the respondent to provide a DK answer to a political knowledge item, factoring in that women tend to provide more DK answers than men (the mean number of DK responses is 5.6 for men and 7.6 for women; two-tailed, significant at $p < .000$). In other words, we divide the sum of all response times of DK answers by the number of DK provided by each respondent.^{4,5}

The main independent variables are sex of respondent and political motivation. Sex is measured as a dichotomous variable, where 1 stands for women and 0 for men.⁶ Political motivation is measured using respondent’s declared political interest (where 0 stands for “not at all interested” and “hardly interested” and 1 stands for “quite interested” and “very interested”). As a robustness check, the analyses have been replicated using respondents’ political information self-assessments as an alternative measure of political motivation. Results reported in Table B3 and Figure B1 in the Supplementary Information File confirm the findings shown in main text.

To control for respondent’s ability in terms of task difficulty and cognitive effort, we include the age and the education level of the respondents, in line with previous studies (Yan and Tourangeau, 2008). We incorporate controls for two alternative explanations. Although there is mixed evidence in the effect of personality traits on response latency (Harms, Jackel, and Montag 2017), we control in all models for the respondent’s need for cognition, with the expectation that respondents high in need for cognition will be more reluctant to answer DK and thus employ more time to answer. In addition, we control for the total duration of the survey for each respondent, as a proxy of the respondent’s general speed.

Table 1. Predictors of response time of DK answers.

	Equation 1	Equation 2
Female	−0.863*** (0.330)	−0.589 (0.439)
Age	0.0352*** (0.0123)	0.0353*** (0.0123)
Educational attainment (ref. cat.: primary)		
Secondary	−0.165 (0.397)	−0.189 (0.398)
Tertiary	−0.895* (0.489)	−0.890* (0.489)
Need for cognition	0.406* (0.220)	0.412* (0.220)
Interested in politics	1.342*** (0.334)	1.634*** (0.456)
Female * interested in politics		−0.611 (0.649)
Duration	0.00683*** (0.000434)	0.00685*** (0.000434)
Constant	2.192** −1.084	2.016* (1.100)
Observations	1056	1056
R-squared	0.239	0.239

Note: Empty cells omitted. Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.
Source: Own elaboration based on the survey.

Linear regression is used to estimate two models. Equation (1) estimates the effect of the sex of the respondent on the amount of time used to answer DK (H1); while Equation 2 incorporates an interaction term to observe gender differences in the propensity to use more/less time in answering DK, conditioned by political motivation (H2).

Results

Column 1 in Table 1 presents the results for Equation 1 (Table B1 in the Supplementary Information File presents descriptive data and a comparison between the original sample and the sample of the regression models). Confirming previous studies, levels of education are negatively correlated with the amount of time used to answer DK, whereas age is positively correlated to response time. As anticipated, need for cognition is positively and significantly related to response time. It also shows that political motivation affects response latency, as respondents with perceived high political interest use more time to give a DK answer than respondents with low political interest. Most important, H1 is confirmed: men use significantly more time to answer DK than women. Confirmation of H1 suggests that gender stereotypes affect both women and men when answering a political knowledge question. Given that gender stereotypes do not depict women as being politically knowledgeable, they take significantly less time to answer they do not know compared to men, who are pressured to show they do know.

To fully test whether motivation affects differently women and men's DK response times, we introduced an interactive term between respondents' sex and their political interest. The expectation in H2 was that there would be different effects for men and women's motivation if the first felt a pressure to be knowledgeable that the latter did not

endure. For the ease of interpretation, Figure 1 shows the marginal effect of political motivation and sex on the predicted DK response time, based on equation 2 in Table 1. Figure 1 shows that political motivation impacts differently women and men's DK response time. There is indeed a difference in latency within men regarding their political motivation. It is estimated that highly interested men are likely to take over 1.6 s more than men declaring low levels of interest to admit that they do not know an answer. However, this association is weaker amongst women.⁷ As it can be seen in Figure 1, the estimates for women with high and low levels of interest overlap. These results support H2, showing that men's political motivation is a discouragement to reply DK that is not as strong for women.

Final remarks

This article contributes to the literature on gender and politics by showing that gender-conformity affects both men and women. Our interpretation of the longer time men take to respond DK is that men are gender stereotyped to be politically knowledgeable. As a consequence, they are reluctant to verbalize their lack of knowledge, which implies that they take as much time as possible before yielding and admitting they do not know the answer.

While some authors have argued that do not know answers simply reflect ignorance on behalf of respondents, regardless of the question format or their personality traits (Jessee, 2017; Luskin and Bullock, 2011), this article shows that DK responses do not distribute randomly. Gender differences in DK response latencies provide an additional piece of evidence regarding the effects of stereotype threat on respondents (Davis and Silver, 2003; Pereira, 2019) and how it results in a further overestimation of men's actual levels of political knowledge, compared to women's.

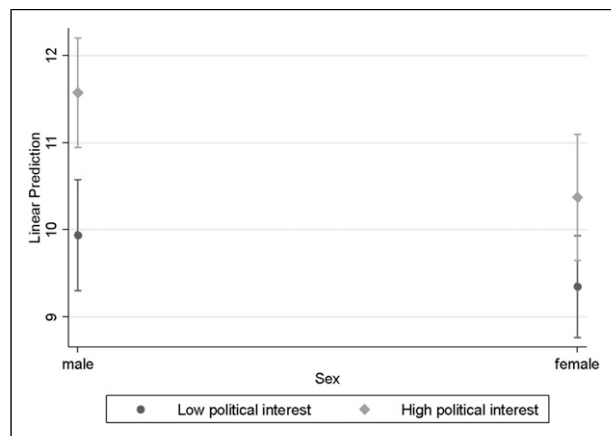


Figure 1. Predicted DK response time over political interest and gender.

Further research should explore the extent to which priming other social identities (McGlone et al., 2006; Shih et al., 1999), amongst other strategies, could enhance respondent's confidence and provide more accurate depiction of what they know about politics.

This article also opens an avenue for further research on survey methodology. We have shown that response latencies of do not know answers hide differentiated traits for women and men, based on gender stereotypes. To date, little research has explored the potential interpretation of groups' differences in response times in relation to data quality and comparability. We offer here evidence that response times differ significantly between women and men, which implies different reactions to survey items. This finding should encourage the use of response latencies as a tool to explore heterogeneity in responses to survey items.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See section A in the Supplementary Information File for further details on the survey.
2. Respondents were recruited by invitation from the panel of Netquest, the survey company in charge of fieldwork, until quotas were completed.
3. In addition, the majority of items were randomized (see Table A2).
4. The 151 respondents who never answered DK to PK item are omitted from the analysis. Respondents who ran out of time are coded as DK, and assigned the maximum time value allowed for each question. To check for any potential bias in missingness, all models have been replicated with an alternative dependent variable that attributes missing values to all respondents who have not been able to provide a response on time (see models in Table B2 in the Supplementary Information). Results remain robust with this alternative variable.
5. Preliminary analysis evaluated the dimensionality of the DK answers confirming that all items belong to one single dimension. The Mokken Scale Analysis showed that all items displayed an H value higher than 0.30 and the scale had good properties ($H = 0.45$).
6. Table B4 in the Supplementary Information confirms the existence of a gender gap in political knowledge in Spain, in line with previous studies.
7. The discrete change of political interest is higher for men (1,63; $p < .000$) than for women (1,02; $p < .050$). Interpretation based on (Brambor et al., 2006).

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