

**Public Misunderstanding of Political Facts:  
How Question Wording Affected Estimates of Partisan Differences in Birtherism**

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### **Abstract**

In 2010 and 2011, highly-visible national surveys documented frequent failure among the public to acknowledge that Barack Obama was born in the United States, especially among Republicans. However, different questions yielded strikingly different results. The highest rate of partisan division was generated by a closed-ended question asked by CBS/New York Times that included potentially leading introductory sentences. The smallest partisan gap in apparent misinformation was generated by an open-ended question asked by ABC News/Washington Post, which did not ask a follow-up that was needed in order to gauge public beliefs about whether Mr. Obama was born in the U.S. This paper reviews the polls on birtherism and describes an experiment embedded in a nationally representative sample survey testing whether methodological features of these two questions might have distorted their results and caused the apparent discrepancy between them. A version of the closed-ended question including the leading introductory sentences yielded a much larger degree of apparent partisan division than did a version of the question without the introductory sentences. Following the open question with another question that clarified people's beliefs (asking about whether Hawaii was part of the United States at the time of Barack Obama's birth) did not alter the conclusions supported by that item about the accuracy of public understanding. This study therefore illustrates how different question wording caused different polls to produce notably different results and provides a caution about the use of potentially leading wording.

Scholars of American politics have long noted that citizens often lack factual knowledge about matters of policy and procedure (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Furthermore, recent research suggests that citizens sometimes not only lack information but actually hold incorrect beliefs, and such beliefs can distort citizens' political attitudes and even public policy outcomes (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Misinformation can be tough to correct (Nyhan and Riefler 2010) and may have played a role, for example, in the Obama Administration's difficulties in passing health care reform (e.g., the rumors of "death panels") (Berinsky 2012). Research findings along these lines have challenged claims that aggregate public opinion is rational (Page and Shapiro 1992) by suggesting that partisanship has led to perceptual biases and public misunderstanding of facts (Bartels 2002; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008) and by illuminating what appears to be motivated cognition (Taber and Lodge 2006).

Another instance of apparent misinformation involved Americans' understanding of President Obama's birthplace. In recent years, many surveys suggested that a substantial number of Americans, especially Republicans, believed that Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S. (or did not know that he was native born) and may therefore have been ineligible to serve as President of the United States. Analysts have raised normative concerns about this particular misinformation because it may have made it difficult for Mr. Obama to effectively govern. Moreover, this belief, referred to as "birtherism," has often been cited as an example of how toxic modern American politics has become and of strong partisanship in the mass public.

As is typical for controversial and widely discussed issues, surveys documenting public opinion on this issue and documenting the gap between Republicans and Democrats (which we refer to as the "partisan gap") employed a variety of different question wordings. One might imagine that even if the wordings lead different polls to reveal different frequencies of

misinformation in the public, the partisan gap would be similar in size across all question wordings. Indeed, this is just what Schuman and Presser's (1981) "form-resistant correlation" hypothesis would predict. Those investigators documented many instances in which variation of question wordings changed marginal distributions of responses but left correlations between items unchanged. If true, this can be a source of peace of mind for researchers who wish to study the partisan gap in misinformation, because they can have confidence that their findings will not be a function of choice of the particular question wording employed in a survey.

In this paper, we show that this was not the case with regard to beliefs about Mr. Obama's birthplace. Not only did different question wordings produce notably different levels of misinformation, but some wordings produced much larger partisan gaps than did others. After reviewing this evidence, we propose two possible explanations for the most dramatic discrepancy between polls: one involving the presence of potentially leading sentences, and the other involving the lack of a follow-up question to clarify beliefs. We then report tests of these hypotheses using data from a survey of a nationally representative sample of American adults, which confirmed one hypothesis while disconfirming the other. In doing so, we show the limits of the form-resistant correlation hypothesis and illustrate how conclusions about misinformation can be exaggerated or minimized depending on whether wording includes an enticement that is especially appealing to one partisan group.

In doing so, we put a spotlight on one instantiation of a story that has played out on the national stage over and over again in recent decades: different survey organizations each craft questions ostensibly measuring the same opinion, and yet the organizations employ different question structures and difference choices of words. It is almost as if each organization strives not to ask others' questions and instead seeks to take a unique approach to measurement. Yet the

outcome is the same every time: different organizations produce strikingly divergent results.

Thus, perhaps without realizing or intending to do so, survey organizations seeking to enhance public understanding of public opinion and to contribute valuable information to political debate may end up undermining themselves in the process. That is, divergence across results of different polls may lower public confidence in the value of survey research more generally. In fact, it would not be unreasonable for observers to ask, “How can survey researchers claim to produce accurate measurements when different studies reach such different conclusions?” Because these differences routinely exceed the stated margin of sampling error of polls, researchers cannot fall back on this explanation to account for the discrepancies. So they are left claiming that different results are due to the use of different question wordings (see, e.g., Newport 2004) or occur because “people are changing their minds” (Kohut 2012), yet such claims are often made after the fact, not bolstered by direct experimental evidence showing that divergence in results are indeed due to controllable factors instead of the general unreliability of the survey method. This paper seeks to provide such experimental evidence in an effort not only to help explain divergence between poll results in terms of distributions and correlations but also to illustrate the value of adhering to best practices in questionnaire design (thus homogenizing measurement approaches across surveys) rather than seeking to write unique questions for every survey.

### **A Review of Polls on Birtherism**

Documentation of public misunderstanding about Mr. Obama’s birthplace was produced by a variety of surveys conducted by a variety of organizations with a variety of questioning

approaches (see Table 1; see the Appendix for full question wordings for all polls).<sup>1</sup> The quantity of interest here is the percentage of Americans who did not explicitly stated that Mr. Obama was born in the United States. To generate that percentage for each poll (which we refer to as the people who said Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S.), we pooled respondents who explicitly said he was born in another country with respondents who volunteered that they did not know his birthplace.<sup>2</sup>

To tap this belief, most organizations asked closed-ended questions. For example, Fox News asked a simple, minimally balanced question during April 3-5, 2011: "Do you think Barack Obama was born in the United States, or not?" Of the full sample, 33% failed to answer accurately. 16% of Democrats did so,<sup>3</sup> 31% of non-partisans did so, and 53% of Republicans did so (partisan gap, Republican – Democrat: 37 percentage points).

As shown in Table 1, other survey organizations asked generally similar questions, but there were important key differences: (1) some provided more balanced wording (e.g., Pew

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<sup>1</sup> In collecting the polls, we only included ones that involved random digit dial (RDD) to landlines and cell phones by live interviewers, and Internet polls of samples of respondents recruited via probability methods. We excluded telephone surveys that did not call cell phones and surveys conducted via the Internet with non-probability samples.

<sup>2</sup> All organizations allowed respondents to volunteer a "don't know" answer. Given that there may be social desirability pressures not to denigrate the President of the United States (particularly to a live telephone interviewer), answering "don't know" may be a comfortable way for a respondent to express skepticism about Mr. Obama's legitimacy to be president. We also analyzed the data excluding "don't know" responses and reached similar conclusions to those described in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Media polls classify partisans according to the initial question of the traditional two-part item used to measure party identification. Accordingly, they do not assess whether Independents lean towards one party or the other in reporting partisan breakdowns for the birthers items. In analyzing our own data below, we adopt a similar convention for comparability.

Research Center; Vanity Fair/60 Minutes/CBS); (2) some measured both certainty and belief at the same time (e.g., CNN/Opinion Research Corporation (ORC); Gallup Organization); (3) some included an explicit don't know option (e.g., Gallup Organization). Across the results produced by these organizations, between 28% and 45% of the full sample did not say that Mr. Obama was born in the U.S. before the public release of the birth certificate, and between 20% and 35% offered the "birther" response after the release. The partisan gaps ranged from 27% to 43% before the release of the certificate and from 19 to 33% afterwards.

In general, transforming a question that was minimally balanced (Fox) emphasizing the correct answer to one that was fully balanced (Pew, Vanity Fair/CBS) apparently decreased the number of people who seemed to possess correct information. Allowing people to express uncertainty (CNN/ORC) apparently increased the prevalence of correct understanding. Encouraging "don't know" responses (Gallup) was associated with a decrease in the prevalence of correct understanding.

The closed-ended question asked by CBS/New York Times was quite different from the others because it offered a rationale for itself, effectively adding a sentence to precede the PIPA question: "According to the Constitution, American presidents must be 'natural born citizens.' Some people say Barack Obama was not born in the United States, but was born in another country. Do you think Barack Obama was born in the United States, or do you think he was born in another country?" In a poll from April 5-12, 2010, 42% of the full sample said that Mr. Obama was born in another country, and this figure was 19% among Democrats, 49% among non-partisans, and 59% among Republicans (partisan gap: 39 percentage points). When the question was asked a year later (April 15-20, 2011), the full sample result was about the same (43%), but the partisan gap increased due to an increase of birtherism among Republicans: 19%

of Democrats, 48% of non-partisans, and 67% of Republicans said that Obama was born in another country (partisan gap: 48 percentage points). The data from the 2011 CBS/New York Times poll were widely reported in the news media (e.g., Babington 2011; Malcolm 2011; Rutten 2011).

To test whether the poll results were significantly different from one another, we divided the polls into three time periods: (1) spring/summer, 2010, (2) spring, 2011, before President Obama's official birth certificate was released, and (3) spring, 2011, after his birth certificate was released, an event that was covered extensively by the national news media. Altogether, there were 17 comparisons of pairs of polls conducted during the same period. In 13 of these comparisons, the pairs of polls produced significantly different results.<sup>4</sup> There were also significant differences in the reported partisan gaps.<sup>5</sup> Of the 17 comparisons between pairs of polls using closed-ended questions conducted during the same time period, 12 pair-wise comparisons between partisan gaps differed significantly.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The only pairs of polls that did not differ significantly from one another were: (1) CBS/New York Times April, 2010, PIPA November, 2010; (2) CBS/New York Times April, 2011, Gallup April, 2011; (3) CBS/New York Times April, 2011, Pew April, 2011; and (4) Gallup April, 2011, Pew April, 2011. These polls found that the percentage of Americans not believing that Mr. Obama was born in the United States was 42-45%.

<sup>5</sup> Note that it is more difficult to observe significant differences in the partisan gaps (even if they are of the same size as the differences in the full sample estimates) because of reduced statistical power owing to smaller samples sizes in partisan subgroups.

<sup>6</sup> The pairs of polls that did not differ significantly from one another were: (1) CBS/New York Times April, 2010, Vanity Fair/60 Minutes/CBS June, 2010; (2) CBS/New York Times April, 2010, PIPA November, 2010; (3) Vanity Fair/60 Minutes/CBS June, 2010, PIPA November, 2010; (4) CNN/ORC March, 2011, Fox April, 2011; (5) Gallup April, 2011, Pew April, 2011. According to these polls, the partisan gap ranged from 36 percentage points to 43 percentage points.

In contrast to these closed-ended questions, ABC News and the Washington Post obtained notably more optimistic results. They first asked an open-ended question: “On another subject, where was Barack Obama born, as far as you know?” Respondents who volunteered that they did not know were asked, “Is it your best guess that Obama was born in the United States, or in another country?” Furthermore, this was the only poll that was explicitly described as probing volunteered “don’t know” answers rather than simply accepting them.

In a poll conducted April 22-25, 2010, 23% of respondents mentioned a non-U.S. location in response to either the initial question or the follow-up or said that they did not know. This figure dropped to 16% in a poll conducted April 28-May 1, 2011. In the 2010 survey, the partisan gap of 18 percentage points was much smaller than in surveys that asked only closed-ended questions: 17% of Democrats said Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S. or that they didn’t know, compared to 21% of non-partisans and 35% of Republicans. After the release of the birth certificate in 2011, the partisan gap was even smaller—13 percentage points. 9% of Democrats offered a birther response or said that they did not know, as did 19% of non-partisans and 22% of Republicans.<sup>7</sup>

The proportion of respondents who said that Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S. or that they didn’t know in the April, 2010 ABC/Washington Post poll was significantly smaller ( $p < .05$ ) than that proportion in four other polls that asked closed-ended questions in 2010 (CBS/NYT from April, 2010; Vanity Fair/60 Minutes/CBS from June, 2010; CNN/ORC from July, 2010; and PIPA from November, 2010). The proportion in the ABC/Washington Post poll

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<sup>7</sup> If responses to the follow-up question are ignored, the percentage of respondents who reported a non-U.S. location or said that they did not know is 33% in the 2010 survey and 25% in the 2011 survey. Ignoring the follow-up question, the partisan gap is 21 percentage points in the 2010 survey and is 12 percentage points in the 2011 survey.

done after the birth certificate release was also significantly smaller than that proportion in the two other surveys that asked closed-ended questions during the same time by CNN/ORC and Gallup ( $p < .05$ ). The partisan gaps estimated by the ABC/Washington Post polls were also significantly smaller than the estimates of that gap yielded by closed-ended questions during the same time periods ( $p < .05$ ). For example, during April, 2010, CBS/New York Times reported a partisan gap of 40 percentage points, and ABC/Washington Post reported a partisan gap of 18 percentage points. Thus, the open-ended question yielded the highest rates of apparent correct understanding and the smallest partisan gaps.

However, if a researcher's goal is to gauge how many Americans believed that Mr. Obama was qualified to serve as President, the wording of the ABC/Washington Post question involves some ambiguity. This ambiguity occurs with regard to respondents who answered the open-ended question by saying "Hawaii." Hawaii became a part of the U.S. in 1959, and Barack Obama was born in 1961. Therefore, it is possible that some of the people who answered the open-ended question by saying "Hawaii" believed that Hawaii was not part of the U.S. at the time of Mr. Obama's birth, so that Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S.<sup>8</sup>

If the open-ended questions had been followed by a question ascertaining whether respondents who said "Hawaii" believed that it was a part of the U.S. at the time of Mr. Obama's birth, the proportion of Americans saying Mr. Obama was born in America might have fallen, and the apparent partisan gap may have been just as large as in responses to the closed-ended questions. This would mean that the partisan gap was affected by misunderstanding (or intentional misreporting) about whether Hawaii was a part of the U.S. at the time of Mr.

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<sup>8</sup> A 2009 interactive voice response (IVR) poll of landline telephone numbers only by Public Policy Polling found that 6% of respondents did not believe that Hawaii was part of the United States and that 4% were not sure.

Obama's birth, not by misunderstanding (or intentional misreporting) of where Mr. Obama was born. To explore this possibility, we tested whether the open-ended question asking where Mr. Obama was born might have overstated the proportion of people who thought he was born in the U.S (and understated the partisan gap).

We also designed a survey experiment to explore another factor that might have influenced the size of the observed partisan gap in these polls. The largest partisan gap (48 percentage points) was documented by the CBS/New York Times poll in April 15-20, 2011. This estimated gap was significantly greater than the partisan gaps of the four other polls conducted in the spring of 2011 before the birth certificate was publically released ( $p < .05$ ). By mentioning that "some people" believed that Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S. and *not* mentioning that other people believed he was born in the U.S. (as did PIPA's question), the wording might have appeared to legitimize only the former response and thereby encouraged people to select this incorrect option (see Schuman and Presser 1981). Furthermore, the CBS/New York Times question is the only closed-ended question that told respondents which answer would challenge the legitimacy of Mr. Obama's presidency (i.e., it said that being a "natural born citizen" is necessary in order for a person to be president). Therefore, the introduction of this question might have been responsible for exacerbating the partisan gap apparent relative to other polls using closed-ended question formats. Without the introduction, CBS/New York Times might have obtained results more like the open-ended question did.

### **Data Collection**

The experiment was embedded in a survey conducted by Knowledge Networks (KN, now

called GfK Custom Research).<sup>9</sup> KN recruited a nationally representative probability sample of American adults to join its KnowledgePanel via random digit dialing telephone calls and by mailings sent to addresses selected via address-based sampling. The target population was U.S. adults. All interviews were conducted in English.

3,772 respondents sampled from the KnowledgePanel were invited to complete the survey, and 3,414 did so between May 4 and 27, 2011 (AAPOR COOP1 = 90.5%; CUMRR2 = 2.9%). The experiment was conducted after the release of President Obama's long-form birth certificate. Thus, we collected data after the American public had the opportunity to become well-informed on the facts of the matter, so we should expect to see more correct answers than were documented by polls done before that date.<sup>10</sup>

### **Measures and Experimental Design**

The questions on birtherism were preceded by these instructions: “When answering the next questions, please answer by yourself based just on what you know now—please don't ask anyone for help, and please don't look up the answers to these questions on the Internet or in books or in any other way.”

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<sup>9</sup> Various incentives were offered in exchange for joining the panel: financial remuneration, incentive points redeemable for cash, and free monthly Internet access and a laptop computer (if the household did not already have these).

<sup>10</sup> KN constructed weights adjusting for unequal probability of selection and post-stratifying based on gender, age, race, education, census region, household income, home ownership status, residence in a metropolitan area, and Internet access, using the most recently available Current Population Survey (CPS) for benchmarks. All demographic variables were measured when respondents joined the panel. All analyses reported in this paper were conducted applying these weights.

About one quarter of the respondents, selected randomly, were asked the CBS/New York Times closed-ended question about Barack Obama's birthplace:

“According to the Constitution, American presidents must be ‘natural born citizens.’ Some people say Barack Obama was NOT born in the United States, but was born in another country. Do you think Barack Obama was born in the United States, or do you think he was born in another country?” (response options: “born in the United States,” “born in another country”).<sup>11</sup>

Another one-quarter of the respondents, randomly selected, were asked an alternative version of that question that eliminated the lengthy introduction:

“Is your best guess that Barack Obama was born in the United States or that he was born in another country?” (response options: “born in the United States,” “born in another country”).<sup>12</sup>

The remaining half of the respondents answered an open-ended question modeled after the ABC News/Washington Post question: “Where was Barack Obama born, as far as you know?” 1,651 of the 1,702 (97%) respondents who were asked the open-ended question typed an answer into a text box.

We implemented computer coding and also engaged human coders to assign the

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<sup>11</sup> CBS/New York Times asked their question by telephone, whereas we asked it in an Internet survey. Therefore, the results reported here might have been different if our experiment was embedded in a telephone survey. We look forward to future studies exploring this possibility.

<sup>12</sup> Note that this question differs slightly from the CBS/New York Times question, in that it asks respondents to give their “best guess,” which might seem likely to decrease the likelihood of respondents saying “don’t know.” However, this was not the case. The “don’t know” rate for the CBS/New York Times wording was 1.2% compared to 1.8% for the alternative question ( $p = .45$ ).

responses to one of seven categories: (1) Hawaii; (2) the U.S. generically; (3) a specific location in the U.S. other than Hawaii (e.g., Illinois); (4) a non-U.S. location (e.g., Kenya); (4) don't know; (5) a sarcastic response indicating that the respondent did not believe that the President was born in the United States (e.g. "Hawaii, so he claims"); (6) two different answers that would be coded in two of the above categories (e.g., "Hawaii or Kenya"; and (7) non-codeable responses (e.g. "who cares?").<sup>13</sup>

*Hawaii's Status.* The open-ended question was followed by this question: "As far as you know, is Hawaii one of the 50 United States of America, is it an unincorporated territory of the United States of America, or is it not a part of the United States of America?"<sup>14</sup> People who said that Hawaii was one of the 50 United States were then asked: "As far as you know, was Hawaii one of the 50 United States of America in 1961, or was Hawaii not part of the United States of America in that year?" People who said that Hawaii was an unincorporated territory (meaning that Mr. Obama is a natural born citizen) were asked: "As far as you know, was Hawaii an unincorporated territory of the United States of America in 1961, or was Hawaii not part of the United States of America in that year?" Respondents who said that Hawaii was a state (or an

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<sup>13</sup> A computer did most of the coding by sorting the responses alphabetically and identifying answers that were offered frequently while correcting common misspellings. Responses not coded by the computer were given to two people who were not aware of the hypotheses being tested and did not communicate with one another; they assigned each answer to one of the above categories. When the two human coders disagreed, the authors classified the response. According to Holsti's (1969) method, the intercoder reliability for the two human coders was 0.88. Controlling for chance via Scott's pi (Scott 1955), the reliability of the coding was 0.87.

<sup>14</sup> Respondents were randomly assigned to read the response options in one of two orders. Half of the respondents received "one of the 50 United States of America" first and "not part of the United States of America" last. The other half received "not part of the United States of America" first and "one of the 50 United States of America" last. This rotation had no significant impact on people's answers ( $p = .69$ ).

unincorporated territory) in 1961 were coded as correctly knowing that being born in Hawaii in 1961 fulfilled the residency requirements to be president.

*Party Identification.* Prior to the administration of the birthplace questions, respondents were asked: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?” People who said “Independents” or “something else” or declined to answer are referred to below as non-partisans. This operationalization of party identification matches the approach used by the survey organizations cited above.

## **Results**

### ***Demographic Representativeness***

As shown in Table 2, distributions of various demographic variables in the unweighted and weighted survey sample were similar to those of the American adult population, as documented by the May, 2011, Current Population Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau.

### ***Replication of the CBS/New York Times Finding***

Among respondents who were asked the CBS/New York Times question, 24.3% said that Mr. Obama was not born in the United States (see Table 3). Among Democrats, this percentage was 11.2%, in contrast to 43.7% among Republicans and 22.7% among non-partisans. Thus, the partisan gap was 32.5 percentage points, significantly different from zero ( $F(1, 529) = 42.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This and other such statistical significance tests reported here are based on contingency tables. All  $\chi^2$  statistics were corrected for survey design effects using the two-step procedure described by Rao and Scott (1984), yielding test statistics that are distributed as F.

It is not sensible to compare these figures directly to the results of the CBS/New York Times poll done in April, 2011 (the month before our survey was fielded), because that survey was conducted prior to the release of Mr. Obama's birth certificate, and ours was done just after the release. However, we can use the Gallup poll results to simulate what results we might have obtained had our survey been done a month earlier.

According to the Gallup polls done in April and May, 2011, just before and just after the release of the birth certificate, that event decreased the percent of Americans giving the incorrect answer by 9 percentage points, and the partisan gap shrank by 10 percentage points. Adjusting the result we obtained using the CBS/New York Times question wording accordingly, we get an adjusted 33% of people giving the incorrect answer and an adjusted partisan gap of 42.5 percentage points. The 33% is somewhat smaller than the 43% obtained by CBS/New York Times in April, 2011, and the partisan gap is slightly less than the 48 percentage point partisan gap reported by CBS/New York Times. Of course, this approach makes an assumption that the counterfactual CBS/New York Times poll can be constructed by using the pre/post percentage point changes from the Gallup polls. This assumption may not be tenable given that the Gallup question wording differed notably from the CBS/New York Times question wording.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Replication of the ABC/Washington Post Finding***

Among respondents who were asked the open-ended question, 22.8% said that Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S., said that he was born in a specific location outside of the U.S., such as Kenya or Indonesia, or did not know. A smaller partisan gap appeared in responses to

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<sup>16</sup> The pre/post difference could also be calculated in proportional terms rather than in terms of percentage points. This would yield a similar percentage of birthers (30.5%) and a similar adjusted partisan gap (42.4 percentage points).

this question than appeared with the closed-ended question: 13.5% of Democrats said Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S., 27.7% of Republicans said so, and 27.8% of non-partisans said so. The partisan gap, 14.2 percentage points, is statistically significantly different from zero ( $F(1, 1065) = 19.93, p < .001$ ). Thus, we produced results similar to those reported by ABC News/Washington Post using a question nearly identical to theirs, and, as in past studies, the partisan gap for the ABC/Washington Post question (14 percentage points) was much smaller than for the CBS/New York Times question (33 percentage points).<sup>17</sup>

### *The First Two Sentences in the CBS/New York Times Question*

In the full sample, the distributions of answers to the CBS/New York Times question in its original form and to the simplified form of this question were very similar (compare the first two columns in Table 3). Among respondents asked the CBS/New York Times question, 24.3% said that Mr. Obama was not born in the United States. Among respondents asked the alternative wording of that question, 21.0% said that Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S. This difference of 3.3 percentage points was not statistically significant ( $F(1, 1711) = 1.48, p = .22$ ).

However, the two question wordings did produce different responses among Republicans. Among the Republicans who were asked the CBS/New York Times question, 43.7% said that Mr. Obama was not born in the United States. Yet among the Republicans who were asked the alternative wording of the closed question, 26.1% said that Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S. This difference of 17.6 percentage points was statistically significant ( $F(1, 488) = 10.19, p < .002$ ).

Among Democrats and non-partisans, the two question wordings produced comparable

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<sup>17</sup> We did not adjust our results when comparing them to the ABC News/Washington Post survey, because it was also fielded after the release of the long-form birth certificate.

proportions of people answering incorrectly. Among Democrats, the percentages were 11.2% vs. 9.8% for the CBS/New York Times and alternative wordings, respectively ( $F(1, 577) = .16, p = .69$ ). The same was true for non-partisans: 22.7% vs. 27.9%, respectively ( $F(1, 644) = 1.25, p = .26$ ). The pattern for Republicans was significantly different from the pattern for Democrats and non-partisans, combined ( $p = .001$ ).

The partisan gap obtained with the CBS/New York Times wording was 32.5 percentage points, whereas the partisan gap obtained with the alternative question wording was 16.3 percentage points. This reduction by half in the partisan gap, of 16.2 percentage points, was statistically significant ( $p = .01$ ).

Thus, it appears that the CBS/New York Times wording encouraged Republicans to offer skeptical responses, increasing the partisan gap from 16 percentage points to 32 percentage points. Note that the partisan gap obtained with the alternative question wording is very similar to the partisan gap obtained by the ABC News/Washington Post Poll question (14 percentage points), both of which were asked after the release of President Obama's birth certificate. Hence, a main reason for the discrepancy in national polling data about the partisan gap in "birtherism" between closed-ended questions and open-ended questions (and among closed-ended questions) appears to have been attributable to question wording.

### ***The Open-Ended Question and the Hawaii Clarification***

Next, we explored whether the ABC News/Washington Post results may have been misleading regarding the percentage of Americans who thought that Mr. Obama was entitled to be president. This possibility hinges on the notion that some Americans may have believed that Hawaii was not a part of the United States at the time Mr. Obama was born. In fact, few did so: 82.7% of all respondents answered correctly that Hawaii was a part of the U.S. in 1961, and this

percentage was 83.3% among Democrats, 84.8% among Republicans, and 80.6% among non-partisans. Thus, it appears that misinformation on this matter was evenly distributed across party lines—the partisan gap of 1.5 percentage points was not significant ( $F(1, 1065) = .25, p = .62$ ).

Not surprisingly, then, we obtained comparable results when revisiting the open-ended question results and according credit for a correct answer only to people who said that Mr. Obama was born in the U.S. or in a city in the U.S., or who said he was born in Hawaii *and* believed that Hawaii was a part of the U.S. when he was born (treating people who stated he was born in Hawaii but thought it was not part of the U.S. as birthers). Using this analytic approach, 31.4% of the full sample answered incorrectly, 23.2% of Democrats did so, 36.3% of Republicans did so, and 35.5% of non-partisans did so. The partisan gap of 13.1 percentage points is again statistically significant ( $F(1, 1065) = 13.37, p < .001$ ) and about the same size as when we ignored respondents' beliefs about whether Hawaii was part of the U.S. in 1961. In other words, taking into account beliefs about Hawaii's status did not widen the apparent partisan gap in answers to the open-ended question.

## Discussion

Taken together, these results are useful for several reasons. First, the legitimacy of public opinion polls may be called into question if different survey organizations produce different results. Survey research professionals are sensitive to the potential for such differences in results to be attributable to differences in questioning approaches. However, the general public may not be as aware of the impact of question wording and may assume that seemingly similar questions will yield similar results. Furthermore, because the public may be unaware of the differences in question wordings among polls, individuals may be unable to attribute differences between poll

results to differences in wordings. Therefore, survey professionals have a powerful incentive to minimize differences between various polls' results by optimizing the question wordings in all of them.

The evidence reported here shows that apparently very different results were partly attributable to the use of leading introductory sentences in one closed-ended question. Removal of those sentences, which were not present in other questions, caused obtained results to be more similar to those produced by the other closed-ended questions. Therefore, this experiment illustrates the impact of leading introductory sentences and raises caution about employing them in the future. More importantly, however, this experiment can provide some peace of mind for researchers who might have been concerned that discrepancies between polls were attributable to methodological factors other than question wording that might be harder to identify and to control. Fortunately, optimizing question wording appears to produce more convergence among questions and therefore reinforces confidence in the results obtained.

Why did the introductory sentences induce Republicans (but not Democrats) to offer incorrect answers to the closed-ended questions at much higher rates? One possible answer is motivated misreporting. Without those introductory sentences, respondents might have viewed this question as constituting a quiz to assess whether they were well-informed about political facts. When holding this view of their task, respondents may have answered honestly. On the other hand, respondents who heard the introductory sentences might have viewed the question as offering them an opportunity to express anti-Obama sentiment by challenging the legitimacy of his presidency. In other words, some respondents may have answered differently after hearing the introductory sentences because those words constituted instructions about which answer was anti-Obama. Viewed in this way, the CBS/New York Times question may have accurately

tapped some people's anti-Obama sentiment but did not necessarily accurately tap their understanding of Mr. Obama's birthplace.

Another possible explanation for the partisan differences in reaction to the leading question wording involves social desirability pressures. Perhaps Republicans felt that saying that Mr. Obama was not born in the U.S. is disrespectful, which may have inhibited expression of this belief. Inclusion of the leading sentence may have accorded legitimacy to this view and therefore given license to Republicans to provide a response denigrating the President. This reasoning would presumably not apply to Democrats, who were not motivated to denigrate a President from their own party. Future research can explore forms of misinformation where Republican politicians are the objects of judgment to provide a more complete picture of how partisanship moderates responses to leading questions.

In closing, it is useful to note that these results constitute a cautionary tale about political observers' tendency to chastise the American public for lacking correct factual political information (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Kinder 1998). One can make that case based on the evidence from some of the polls done about Mr. Obama's birthplace. Yet other polls suggest much greater prevalence of correct understanding. Therefore, it may be important to carefully attend to question wording effects before blaming the public for being ignorant. Conclusions about public competence hinge on the particular measuring tool employed (see, e.g., Krosnick et al. 2009). Thus, it might be wise for scholars to be restrained before too aggressively pointing accusatory fingers at Americans or before being discouraged by findings that seem to portray the public as disengaged or confused.

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**Table 1: Results of Surveys Measuring the Percent of Americans Who Did Not Say That Barack Obama Was Born in the U.S.**

Survey	Respondents				Partisan Gap	N
	Full Sample	Republicans	Democrats	Non-partisans		
Fox News <i>April 3-5, 2011</i>	33%	53%	16%	31%	37	914
Pew Research Center <i>April 7-10, 2011</i>	45	67	24	48	43	1,432
Vanity Fair/60 Minutes/CBS <i>June 1-3, 2010</i>	37	62	19	38	43	960
CNN/ORC <i>July 16-21, 2010</i>	29	43	16	31	27	1,468
<i>March 11-13, 2011</i>	28	48	12	26	36	1,023
<i>April 29-May 1, 2011*</i>	20	31	11	20	19	1,034
The Gallup Organization <i>April 20-23, 2011</i>	44	65	23	45	43	1,013
<i>May 5-8, 2011*</i>	35	51	19	35	33	1,018
Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) <i>November 6-15, 2010</i>	45	62	21	52	41	848
CBS/New York Times <i>April 5-12, 2010</i>	42	59	19	49	39	1,591
<i>April 15-20, 2011</i>	43	67	19	48	48	1,332
ABC/Washington Post <i>April 22-25, 2010</i>	23	35	17	21	18	1,001
ABC/Washington Post <i>April 28-May 1, 2011*</i>	16	22	9	19	13	1,006

\*These surveys were conducted after the release of Mr. Obama's birth certificate on April 27, 2011.

Note: Figures were computed treating "don't know" responses as valid. Question wordings are as follows: Fox News ("Do you think Barack Obama was born in the United States, or not?"); Pew Research Center ("And one last question to get your view on a topic that has been in the news... Was Barack Obama born in the United States or was

he born in another country?"); Vanity Fair/60 Minutes/CBS ("Do you think Barack Obama was born in the United States, or do you think he was born in another country?"); CNN/ORC ("Do you think Barack Obama was definitely born in the United States, probably born in the United States, probably born in another country, or definitely born in another country?"); Gallup ("Do you think Barack Obama was definitely born in the United States, probably born in the United States, probably born in another country, definitely born in another country, or don't you know enough to say?"); PIPA ("As you may know, some people have suggested that President Obama was not born in the United States. Do you think that Obama was not born in the US, Obama was born in the US, or it is not clear whether Obama was born in the US or not?"); CBS/New York Times ("According to the Constitution, American Presidents must be "natural born citizens." Some people say Barack Obama was NOT born in the United States, but was born in another country. Do YOU think Barack Obama was born in the United States, or was he born in another country?"); ABC News/Washington Post ("On another subject, where was Barack Obama born, as far as you know? (IF DON'T KNOW/NO OPINION) Is it your best guess that Obama was born in the United States, or in another country?")

**Table 2: Demographics of the Survey Sample and the May 2011 Current Population Survey**

<u>Demographic Group</u>	<u>Unweighted</u>	<u>Weighted</u>	<u>CPS May 2011</u>
<u>Age</u>			
18-24	9.8%	10.7%	12.9%
25-34	15.6	17.3	17.9
35-44	19.4	19.0	17.1
45-54	17.5	17.6	19.1
55-64	19.9	19.0	16.0
65-74	12.3	11.0	9.4
75+	5.6	5.4	7.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	3,414	3,414	102,503
<u>Gender</u>			
Male	50.3%	49.6%	48.5%
Female	49.7	50.4	51.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	3,414	3,414	102,503
<u>Education</u>			
Less than high school	8.1%	12.2%	13.7%
High school	30.8	32.4	30.7
Some college	29.7	27.1	28.2
Bachelor's degree or higher	31.4	28.3	27.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	3,414	3,414	102,503
<u>Region</u>			
Northeast	18.3%	17.9%	18.4%
Midwest	26.7	22.1	21.8
South	32.7	37.5	36.7
West	22.3	22.5	23.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	3,414	3,414	102,503
<u>Ethnicity</u>			
White, Non-Hispanic	74.9%	67.9%	67.7%
Black, Non-Hispanic	9.1	11.9	11.6
Other, Non-Hispanic	3.4	5.6	5.6
2+ Races, Non-Hispanic	3.6	1.3	1.1
Hispanic	9.1	13.3	14.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	3,414	3,414	102,503
<u>Household Size</u>			
1	17.4%	13.6%	14.8%
2	38.4	35.4	33.4
3	16.9	18.4	18.9
4	16.2	19.0	17.4
5-6	9.2	10.9	12.8
7-9	1.6	2.3	2.4
10+	.3	.4	.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	3,414	3,414	102,503

**Table 3: Results from Survey Experiment**


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Respondents	<u>Closed-Ended Question</u>		<u>Open-Ended Question</u>		
	CBS Wording	Alternate Wording	Not Born in the U.S	HI Was Part of The U.S.	Not Born in U.S., or HI Was Not Part of the U.S.
Full Sample	24.3%	21.0%	22.8%	82.7%	31.4%
Republicans	43.7	26.1	27.7	84.8	36.3
Democrats	11.2	9.8	13.5	83.3	23.2
Nonpartisans	22.7	27.9	27.8	80.6	35.5
Partisan Gap	32.5	16.3	14.2	1.5	13.1
N	835	877	1702	1702	1702

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Note: Cell entries are percentages of respondents reporting that Mr. Obama was not born in the United States or that they did not know, except for “Know HI Part of U.S.,” which are percentages of respondents saying that Hawaii was part of the United States in 1961.