Political Competence in the United States

Daniel Laurison

Ideally, democracy should mean that people in all social positions can participate equally in political decision-making, through voting and other means. In reality, political participation in the United States is profoundly unequal: those with the most resources participate the most, and the less-privileged are the least likely to vote (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).[1] Understanding the roots of this political inequality is a central enterprise of political scientists and sociologists; however, much of the work on this issue focuses too much on the objective or structural barriers to participation for lower-income and less-educated people, and largely ignores the subjective and felt forces that also limit political participation.

In this article, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of political competence to focus on these harder-to-measure aspects of the relationship between social position and political participation. I use multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) to explore whether patterns of class-differentiated political competence are evident in the context of the United States; I show that they are.

Political Competence

American scholars of politics mostly stay away from Bourdieu (Swartz 2006), so there has been little research applying Bourdieu's work on politics, in *Distinction* or elsewhere, to the American context (one exception is Herbst 1992; Wacquant 2005 also includes some discussion of the United States, while Wacquant 2001 focuses more on government than on elections).

For Bourdieu, political participation is shaped by two types of political competence: technical competence, and perceived legitimacy or the *sense* of political competence. These types of competence are interrelated; people have

> a greater or less capacity to recognize a political question as political and to treat it as such by responding politically, i.e., on the basis of specific political principles (rather than ethical ones, for example). This capacity is inseparable from a more or less strong feeling of being *competent*, in the full sense of the word, which is socially recognized as entitled to deal with political affairs, to express an opinion about them or even to modify their course. (1984: 399; emphasis in original)

Those with smaller volumes of capital are generally socially distant from key actors in the political field: the people producing political content, as well as those reporting on it and those generating survey questions about it, are generally well-educated and relatively well-compensated. This social distance, combined with lower status and fewer resources, limits these individuals' exposure to dominant modes of engaging with politics, and so also limits both their technical political competence and their sense of political competence. (This is not to say, of course, that this is the only factor that matters for participation, or that *only* the advantaged can have high levels of political competence.) The key conceptual move here is that, just as a "taste" for "fine art' and the attendant ability to form opinions about the relative merits of one classic painting over another rarely arises spontaneously among the less-advantaged (however often they might pass art museums on their way to work), a "taste" for politics is not generated simply by exposure to political news or campaign advertising.

There are three ways a low or absent sense of political competence might be observed through a survey: first, those without a sense of political competence will, in a survey or opinion poll, be likely to refuse to answer political questions. In France in the 1960s and 1970s, Bourdieu found that "The probabil-

[1] Portions of this article appear in the forthcoming chapter: Laurison, Daniel. 2013. "La production des opinions aux États-Unis, trente ans après La Distinction." In *Trente ans après La distinction de Pierre Bourdieu*, edited by Philippe Coulangeon and Julien Duval. Paris: Éditions la Découverte. The representation of social space constructed using MCA is similar, though not identical, to that presented in that chapter, and so there is some replication in the data and methods sections. Additionally, there is some overlap in the discussion of American work on political competence, and in the discussion of "don't know" responses.

ity of producing an opinion […was] greater for men than for women, […] rises with educational capital […] and economic capital […] and with social position" (1984:400). American studies of social differences in "don't know" rates (Francis and Busch 1975; Berinsky 2004; Converse 1976) found similar patterns, but explain these differences purely in terms of *technical competence*, i.e. education and knowledge. However, as Bourdieu points out,

> to understand the relationship between educational capital and the propensity to answer political questions, it is not sufficient to consider the capacity to understand, reproduce, and even produce political discourse, which is guaranteed by educational qualifications; one also has to consider the (socially authorized and encouraged) sense of being entitled to be concerned with politics, authorized to talk politics, by applying a specific political culture, i.e., explicitly political principles of classification and analysis […] (1984: 409).

Studies of political sophistication, information, and knowledge (e.g. Galston 2001; Mondak 1999; Levendusky 2011; Petersen, Slothuus, and Togeby 2010) engage with *technical* political competence, but not the *sense* of political competence. The insights of qualitative studies of political engagement suggest that it is not only people's explicitly-held knowledge or cognitive abilities that shape approaches to politics, but also their often non-conscious ideas about themselves and their place in society (Bourdieu 1984, 1979). A lack of political competence, then, should lead to not only a lower propensity to answer political questions, but also reporting attitudes about politics consistent with the idea that this is a realm for other people, and reporting lower rates of voting.

The connection Bourdieu is making with the concept of political competence has three pieces: class and social position shape *habitus*, including perceptions of and a "taste" for politics, or political competence; political competence in turn affects participation; and class and resources also directly facilitate or limit political participation. Work on political participation has dealt extensively with the direct link between social position and participation, and with the link between perceptions of or knowledge about politics and participation, but much less with the social position-perceptions link. This paper is one part of the project of filling in that (mostly) missing link between social positions and ways of understanding, relating to, and perceiving political content and political action.

Without Political Competence

The dominant explanation for the link between class position and political participation is that there are both cognitive skills and material resources necessary for participation in political life (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995); those with less income and education also lack these resources (either because income and education provide them, or because education and income are in turn linked to occupations where relevant skills can be gained). Other studies have included additional mechanisms, including mobilization, group memberships and social network ties, to explain individual differences in likelihood of voting (e.g. Leighley 1995; Teixeira 1992; Timpone 1998).

Political scientists have dealt with the question of individuals' relations to politics by studying the causes and effects of individual political knowledge or sophistication (Carpini and Keeter 1997; Luskin 1987; Popkin 1991) and sense of efficacy (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991; Soss 1999; White 1968). Those with more knowledge, resources, and efficacy (both external and internal—the closest equivalent to the notion of "political competence") are consistently more likely to participate in politics—by voting, contacting elected officials, campaigning, and/or approving of protests—than those with less, even after controlling for educational level (Pollock 1983). Although many of these terms—political engagement, interest, knowledge, internal and external efficacy, and sophistication—are certainly related to the sense of political competence, with few exceptions (Jackman 1970), there is little quantitative work on the ways social position influences feelings of political efficacy or political interest; in studies of the predictors of efficacy, income is sometimes (but not always) used as a "control" but otherwise tends to be ignored (Dyck and Lascher 2008).

A number of qualitative studies, however, have described the class-perception link central to Bourdieu's account of political competence (see Halle 1987; Gaventa 1980; Fantasia 1989; also see Lukes 1974). They show that social position not only shapes political opinions, "objective knowledge" of politics, and voting rates, but also how people think about and understand politics and their place (or lack of place) in political discourse and decision-making.

Eliasoph (1998), despite deliberately avoiding talking about her subjects' class positions, provides good evidence for the role of a classed sense of political competence in shaping political participation. Members of the least civically engaged groups in her study had less income and education than those in the other groups (1998: Appendix 1). These less-involved

people believed that "the only people qualified to hold opinions are those who 'have all the facts,'" and therefore that "politics is not our responsibility. Politics is something that other people do, but not us" (1998: 134). Similarly, in seeking to explain lower participation in "new social movements" among the working classes, Croteau (1995) provides an account of the ways that "working class" people relate to the political differently than those in the "middle class." He shows that working class people "are unlikely to have the sense of entitlement, vision of achievable change, and specialized skills that result in a sense of efficacy and that facilitate movement participation" (1995: 147), and that this lack of a sense of entitlement stems from "structural conditions [and] differentially available cultural resources—based on class status—[that] help to facilitate or hinder the development of a sense of efficacy (1995: 137). It is this description of the status-based sense of entitlement to participate or even form opinions that is missing from most survey-based accounts of political engagement, and which this paper seeks to supplement using nationally-representative quantitative analyses.

Bourdieu's theories of political competence were grounded in his analyses of French opinion surveys; here, I test whether the patterns in the US population look like those found in France in the 1960s. If patterns in the United States in the 21st century can be understood through a reading of *Distinction*, we would expect to see the level of political competence rise with greater quantities of capital and to see evidence of lower political competence among those with less capital. In what follows, I explain the two key operationalizations of political competence examined in this study, then use multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) with data from the General Social Survey to analyze the extent to which political competence indicators vary with social position. I will show that the less-privileged are more likely to say they "don't know" to political questions than those with more resources, and that those with the most capital and evince much greater confidence in their ability to engage with politics and government than do those with the least. These low-political-competence indicators are located close to non-voting in the representation of social space constructed through MCA.

Indicators of Political Competence

The "sense of being entitled" to politics indicated by the concept of political competence is a *relational* sense—it is not likely to be secured through passing above a particular income threshold or gaining a certain educational qualification, so much as it has to do with an individual's sense of his or her place in the social world, and thus that he or she is the *type* of person who does politics. The important question to ask regarding the distribution of political competence, then, is not whether particular educational credentials or income thresholds predict higher levels of political competence; instead, the key question is the extent to which indicators of political competence vary with social position.

Indicator 1: Opinion-offering/"don't know" responses

A person's willingness or refusal to offer an opinion on a political question is an indicator of their political competence. Faced with a survey question that asks respondents to choose among a pre-given set of answers, someone lacking only the particular technical or factual knowledge to respond to that question—such as what the terms "liberal" and "conservative" mean with regard to political ideology—could simply choose a neutral answer near the middle of the given scale, choose at random, or make a guess at a reasonable response (Krosnick, Narayan, and Smith 1996). But, when an agent is called upon to make use of his or her political competence (or put in a situation, such as answering a political poll or a filling out a ballot, where the lack of this competence is made clear), technical competence is not the only factor. The *social* component of political competence, "a more or less strong feeling of being *competent*, in the full sense of the word, that is socially recognized as entitled to deal with political affairs, to express an opinion about them or even to modify their course. (1984: 399)," must also come into play. While a simple lack of knowledge might lead respondents to guess, given most respondents' reluctance to say "don't know" when it is not explicitly offered (Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendick 1986), those who also feel less entitled to participate in politics might be more likely to simply say they "don't know" the answer.

If political competence varies with class, then, those with the least capital should respond with the most "don't knows" to political questions, especially those most difficult to answer on the basis of hermeneutics used to solve other sorts of problems.

Political Competence Indicator 2: Efficacy Questions

The concept of political competence has some overlap with measures of internal political efficacy, which ask questions such as whether the respondent has a "good understanding" of political issues, whether "most people" understand politics better than the respondent.

Low political competence should also be reflected in measures of "external" political efficacy, such as questions about whether legislators care about "people like" the respondent, and whether regular people can influence government; all of these items assess the extent to which survey respondents believe that government and politics are matters that they are entitled to be concerned with. Thus, if political competence varies with social location, we should expect those with the most resources to express the most confidence that they understand politics, and the highest levels of belief that government cares about them and that they can influence the government; those with the least resources should report feeling[2] the least politically "efficacious."

Data and Methods

Geometric Data Analysis, specifically Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) facilitates this kind of relational analysis. MCA is an extension of the correspondence analyses featured in *Distinction* (Le Roux and Rouanet 2009; Rouanet, Ackermann, and Le Roux 2000; Lebaron 2010). Bourdieu deployed Geometric Data Analysis methods in *Distinction* and much of his work thereafter because "the particular relations between a dependent variable (political opinion) and so-called independent variables such as sex, age and religion, tend to dissimulate the complete system of relations that make up the true principle of the force and form specific to the effects recorded in such and such particular correlation" (p. 103). This method makes it easy to show both indicators of the political competence are distributed in social space, across class and educational differences as well as other differences highly salient for generating opinions on public issues in the United States.

The data used in these analyses come from the General Social Survey (GSS), a long-running, nationally representative study which asks questions on a range of topics from religion and ethics to party identification and vote choice. The GSS uses a stratified probability sample, and had an N for 2000-2006 (the years of data used in this analysis) of 12,904; individuals with missing data on one or more of the active variables in the MCA were not used to structure the analysis; that left 4,832 active individuals.

To understand the figures presented in an MCA, one only needs to know that the method analyzes answers to a set of categorical questions chosen by the researcher; it uses these answers to construct a cloud of individuals based on their responses so that the distance between any two individual points in the space indicates the dissimilarity of those individuals' responses to the questions used in constructing the space. Individuals with identical answers to all questions would be located at the same point; individuals with no overlap whatsoever will be quite distant from one another, and more distant the less their responses are shared by others. An analogous cloud of categories (response modalities) is also constructed; the location of a given category is the essentially the average position in the space of all the individuals choosing that category (plus a transformation to move from the cloud of individuals to the cloud of categories). These clouds are projected onto axes so as to maximize the portion of the variance captured by each successive axis. It is then possible to locate categories from questions *not* used in constructing the space in the cloud of categories; the coordinates of one of these "supplemental" categories along an interpreted axis indicate the degree and direction of correlation between membership in that category and in the categories which contribute to that axis.

Results 1: The Active Categories—Constructing a Representation of (modified) Social Space

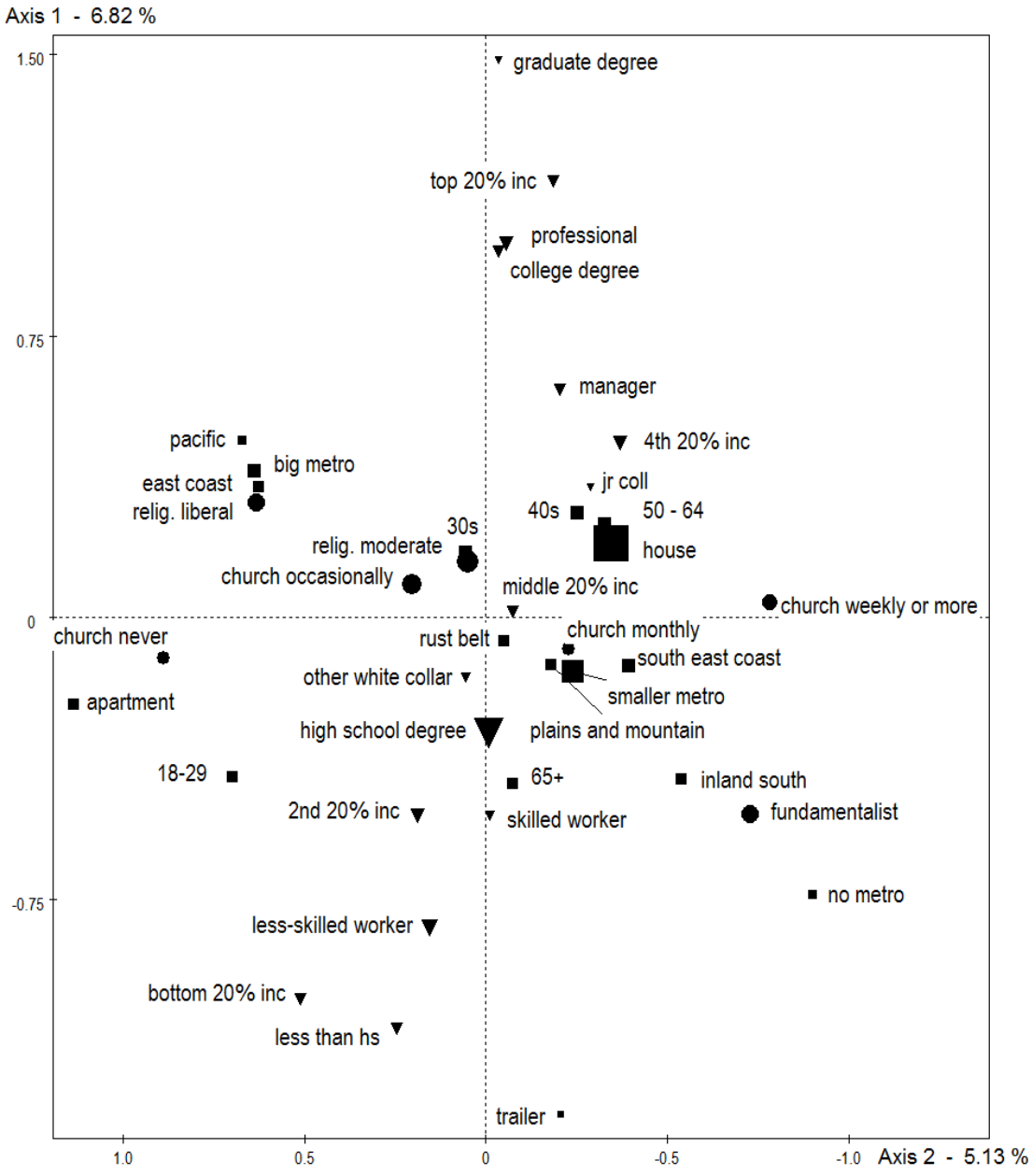
For Bourdieu and most of his followers, constructing a social space usually meant starting with a space of tastes for some set of cultural products, and then using supplementary categories to understand how volume and composition of capital structure that space (Le Roux et al. 2008; Harrits et al. 2010). However, while volume of capital is the primary dimension of difference across every national context studied using MCA thus far, not all societies are structured also by composition of capital; for example, in the United Kingdom it is primarily age that differentiates tastes on a second axis (Prieur and Mike Savage 2011). Here, I begin by constructing a theoretically-informed representation of a broadly-construed social space, using not only indicators of capitals but also of other socially and politically relevant distinctions. I then project political questions into that space as supplementary variables.

In order to represent the social space of the United States, I used variables indicating cultural and economic capital, religious orientation, age, and residential characteristics, as these capture the main axes of difference in American politics. As is customary in MCA, I tried a number of combinations of active variables and recodings in order to achieve a stable rep-

[2] If lower-income people feel this way, this is most likely an accurate assessment, both of their understanding of politics – their level of "technical competence," and ofthe extent to which government is responsive to the needs of poor and working class people (Gilens 2005).

resentation of the data (one not overly affected by small changes in recodings), a well-balanced one (such that very small categories are not exerting undue influence on the principal axes), and one with a relatively high level of total variance captured by the first few axes. I settled on nine questions with 40 active categories. Three questions related to capital and capital composition: occupation (based on the Erikson-Goldthorpe 7-category scheme, 1992:140), household income (in quintiles), and educational degree (all indicated by triangles in Figure 1). Four related to demographic and residential characteristics: age (in five categories), type of home, region of the country, and size of the metropolitan area (indicated by squares). Finally, two questions concerned religion: religious fundamentalism and church attendance (indicated by circles). These nine questions each have between 3 and 6 active categories. The resulting cloud of individuals is well-distributed, indicating no problems with the analysis.

Figure 1. All Active Categories in Plane 2-1



Interpreting the Axes

The first step in analyzing the results of an MCA is to interpret the axes[3] (Greenacre 2006:141). Table 1 presents the eigenvalues and modified rates of variance of the first five axes. Axes are interpreted using the "contributions and points" method (Le Roux and Rouanet 2009); a category is included in the interpretation of an axis if it has a contribution to the total variance of that axis greater than it would be if all points made equal contributions, i.e., greater than the average contribution (by definition, simply 1/k, where k is the number of categories). Table 2 lists the contributions and coordinates of all the categories active in structuring the space; categories that contribute above the threshold for interpretation for an axis are in bold font. Figure 1 displays the category points for all the active categories.

Axis 1, as in most constructions of social spaces using GDA methods (Prieur, Rosenlund, and Skjott-Larsen 2008; Le Roux et al. 2008; Blasius and Friedrichs 2008), is clearly a volume-of-capital axis, with the largest contributions made by degree and income. The axis is also defined by contributions from the "trailer" category (a type of low-cost, pre-fabricated home), the fundamentalist category (a religious orientation found disproportionately among the less-advantaged), and the opposition between (often wealthier) large metropolitan areas and (often poorer) rural areas.

Axis 2 is defined primarily by religiosity (church attendance and fundamentalism) and secondarily by residential characteristics. On the left of Figure 1 are categories associated with less religiosity, with cities, and with the coasts; categories indicating greater religiosity and life in smaller towns and rural areas are on the right. This is what American political commentators might call a "red-state, blue-state" axis; I call it a cosmopolitanism axis, with greater connections to urban centers and religious practices that look more like those in Europe on the left, and the opposite characteristics on the right. This axis also captures differences in capital composition rather well: those with more education but lower incomes are centered on the left (urban/less-religious) side (not shown here), while those with higher incomes and less education are centered on the right; these oppositions, however, do not appear to contribute much to differences in political competence in the United States; instead, most of the meaningful distinctions correspond to volume of capital as captured by the first axis.

[3] First one must decide how many axes to interpret; here, the first two axes were retained for analysis. The modified rate for the first axis is 64% of the variance; adding the 2nd axis brings the cumulative total to 82%, while adding the third axis contributes little mathematically or substantively to the interpretation.

Table 1. Eigenvalues and Modified Rates

	Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 3	Axis 4	Axis 5
Variances of Axes (eigenvalues)	0.238	0.179	0.150	0.147	0.141
Percentage of Total Variance	6.82%	5.13%	4.30%	4.21%	4.04%
Modified Rates	63.8%	18.2%	5.97%	5.11%	3.53%
Cumulated Modified Rates	63.8%	82.0%	88.0%	93.1%	96.6%

Table 2. Contributions & Coordinates

	Axis 1		Axis 2	
	Coord-inate	*Contri-bution*	*Coord-inate*	*Contri-bution*
Degree				
less than hs	-1.1	**8.2**	0.24	0.5
high school	-0.31	2.3	-0.01	0
junior college	0.35	0.4	-0.29	0.4
college degree	0.98	**7.4**	-0.04	0
graduate	1.48	**9**	-0.04	0
Cumulative Contribution of the Question		***18.3***		*0.9*
Occupational Group				
professional	1	1.5	0.7	**5.5**
manager	0.61	0.3	0.06	0
other white collar	-0.16	0.8	-0.25	0.8
skilled worker	-0.53	0.6	-0.33	1.5
less-skilled worker	-0.83	1.5	-0.07	0.1
Cumulative Contribution of the Question		*4.8*		*8*
Type of Home				
trailer	-1.32	**5.4**	-0.21	0.2
house	0.2	1.2	-0.34	**4.8**
apartment	-0.23	0.5	1.14	**14.6**
Cumulative Contribution of the Question		*7*		***19.6***
Income Quintile				
bottom 20% inc	-1.02	**8.2**	0.51	**2.8**
2nd 20% inc	-0.53	2.4	0.19	0.4
middle 20% inc	0.01	0	-0.07	0
4th 20% inc	0.46	2.1	-0.37	1.8
top 20% inc	1.16	**10**	-0.19	0.3
Cumulative Contribution of the Question		***22.8***		*5.4*
Fundamentalism				
fundamentalist	-0.52	**3.7**	-0.73	**9.6**
relig. moderate	0.15	0.4	0.05	0.1
relig. liberal	0.31	1.3	0.63	**7.1**
Cumulative Contribution of the Question		*5.4*		***16.8***
Church Attendance				
church weekly or more	0.04	0	-0.78	**9.7**
church monthly	-0.08	0.1	-0.23	0.7
church occasionally	0.09	0.1	0.2	0.8
church never	-0.11	0.1	0.89	**9.8**
Cumulative Contribution of the Question		*0.3*		***21***

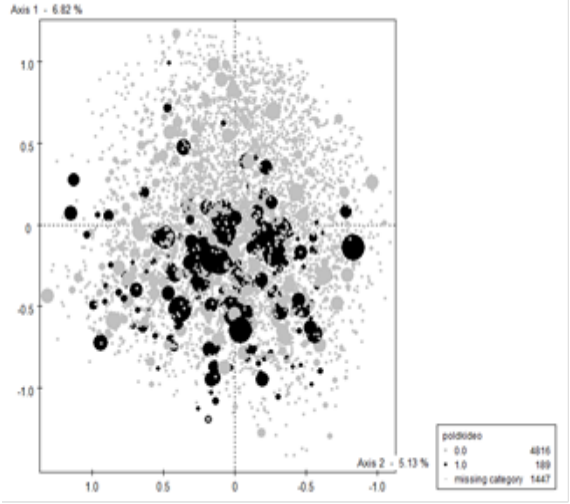
Continued table 2

	Axis 1		Axis 2	
	Coord-inate	*Contri-bution*	*Coord-inate*	*Contri-bution*
Region				
east coast	0.35	1	0.63	**4.3**
rust belt	-0.06	0	-0.05	0
plains and mountain	-0.13	0.1	-0.18	0.3
inland south	-0.43	1.5	-0.54	**3**
south east coast	-0.13	0.2	-0.4	2
pacific	0.47	1.4	0.67	**3.9**
Cumulative Contribution of the Question		*4.2*		***13.5***
Metropolitan Area Size				
big metro	0.39	1.5	0.64	**5.3**
medium metro	0.25	0.7	0.28	1.2
smaller metro	-0.14	0.4	-0.24	1.5
no metro	-0.74	**3.1**	-0.9	**6**
Cumulative Contribution of the Question		*5.7*		***14***
Age Group				
18-29	-0.43	1.5	0.7	**5.5**
30s	0.17	0.3	0.06	0
40s	0.28	0.8	-0.25	0.8
50-64	0.25	0.6	-0.33	1.5
65 and over	-0.44	1.5	-0.07	0.1
Cumulative Contribution of the Question		*4.8*		*8*

Results 2: Political Competence

After a modified social space has been constructed, multiple correspondence analysis can display the ways that space structures political competence by projecting answers to questions *not* used to create the space onto the primary axes. A "supplemental" category is thus positioned in the space on essentially the average of the positions of all the individuals supplying that answer; the greater the distance between categories, the greater the social distance in the constructed space between the groups of individuals who chose each of those responses.

Figure 2a, 2b, 2c:
Political and Worldview "Don't knows"



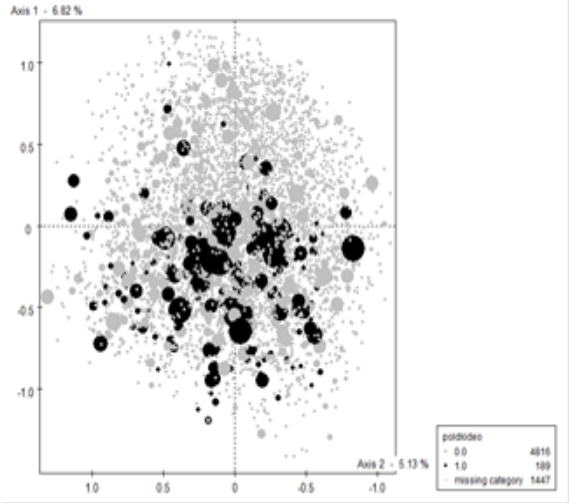
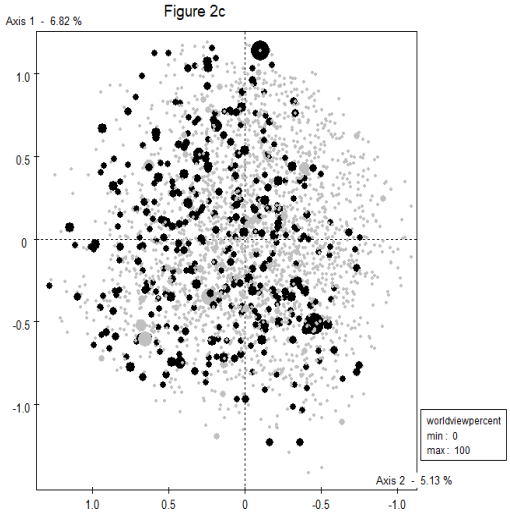


Figure 2c



Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c show the cloud of individuals: each dot represents one individual survey respondent. In Figures 2a and 2b, the size of each dot indicates the frequency with which the respondent answered "don't know" to up to five political questions[4] (not all respondents are given all items in the GSS; the questions are on the role of government, political ideology, and confidence in the legislature, the federal government, and the judiciary); larger dots indicate that the respondent said "don't know" to a greater portion of the political questions they received. In Figure 2a, the colors of the dots indicate whether an individual said they "don't know" their position on the political ideology scale (from extremely conservative to extremely liberal; black is "don't know" and grey is any substantive non-missing answer); in Figure 2b, the colors correspond to whether and for whom respondents reported voting in the 2004 election. In Figure 2c, responses to non-political questions are shown: the size of the dots indicates the frequency with which respondents answered "don't know" to questions about their view of the world (such as their image of characteristics of God, and whether people are generally trustworthy, helpful, and fair); dots are black if the individual said they "don't know" whether there is an afterlife, and grey if they gave an answer.

Figure 2a shows clearly that rates of political "don't know" response increase as volume of capital decreases along Axis 1: the larger dots (for more "don't knows") and the black dots (for not knowing ideology) are concentrated in the lower half of the constructed social space. Compare this with Figure

[4] I included only those questions about politics that were A) framed as questions about what government should or should not do (not those asked in moral terms) or about political institutions or ideologies and B) were not about domestic or foreign spending priorities.

2c, which shows answers to non-political (but at least equally abstract) questions distributed fairly evenly across the whole space. If we accept that those lower levels of political competence—with less knowledge about politics and less confidence that they are legitimate producers of political opinions—will say "don't know" more to political questions, this is good evidence that political competence is tied to social position.

Figure 2b shows that an even more consequential form of political abstention—not voting—displays essentially the same pattern as does saying "don't know." (Figure 2b includes fewer individuals than are shown in Figure 2a because only respondents to the 2006 GSS were asked about their voting in 2004; however, the category points for non-participation in all three elections included in this data are all located in the bottom half of the figure, and are all more than .4—the threshold for calling a difference "important"—from the category points for those elections' reports of voting [not shown]). While social stratification of political participation is not itself a surprising result, the close correspondence between the patterns of the two kinds of non-participation is worth noting; those with less resources are less likely to express political opinions in any format[5].

These figures together illustrate that those who are the least-advantaged are indeed the most likely to say "don't know" to political questions. Further, they show that this is not a universal feature of responses to *all* kinds of questions; the locations in social space of those saying "don't know" to non-political questions are far more varied than the locations of those who say they "don't know" about politics. In other words, those with the most capital in the contemporary United States appear to have the highest levels of comfort answering political questions, while those with the least capital indeed are the most likely to absent themselves from political survey questions with "don't know" responses. These results mirror those Bourdieu reported in *Distinction;* since survey researchers work hard to minimize "don't know" responses (only one of the political, and none of the worldview, questions included here explicitly offers respondents the option of saying they "don't know" or "haven't thought much about" the issue), this is strong evidence that those located lower in the social space have a sense that they are not socially legitimated producers of political opinions[6].

[5] This figure also shows an interesting pattern which is not the focus of this paper, but is discussed at greater length in an earlier paper using similar analyses (2013): the main difference between Republican and Democratic voting is along Axis 2.

[6] In another paper, I used various forms of multivariate regression to show that this is not simply the outcome of the lower levels of education and thus technical political competence; there is a statistically significant relationship between income and political "don't know" response, even controlling for education and other attributes that might contribute to technical competence.

Figure 3. Political Efficacy

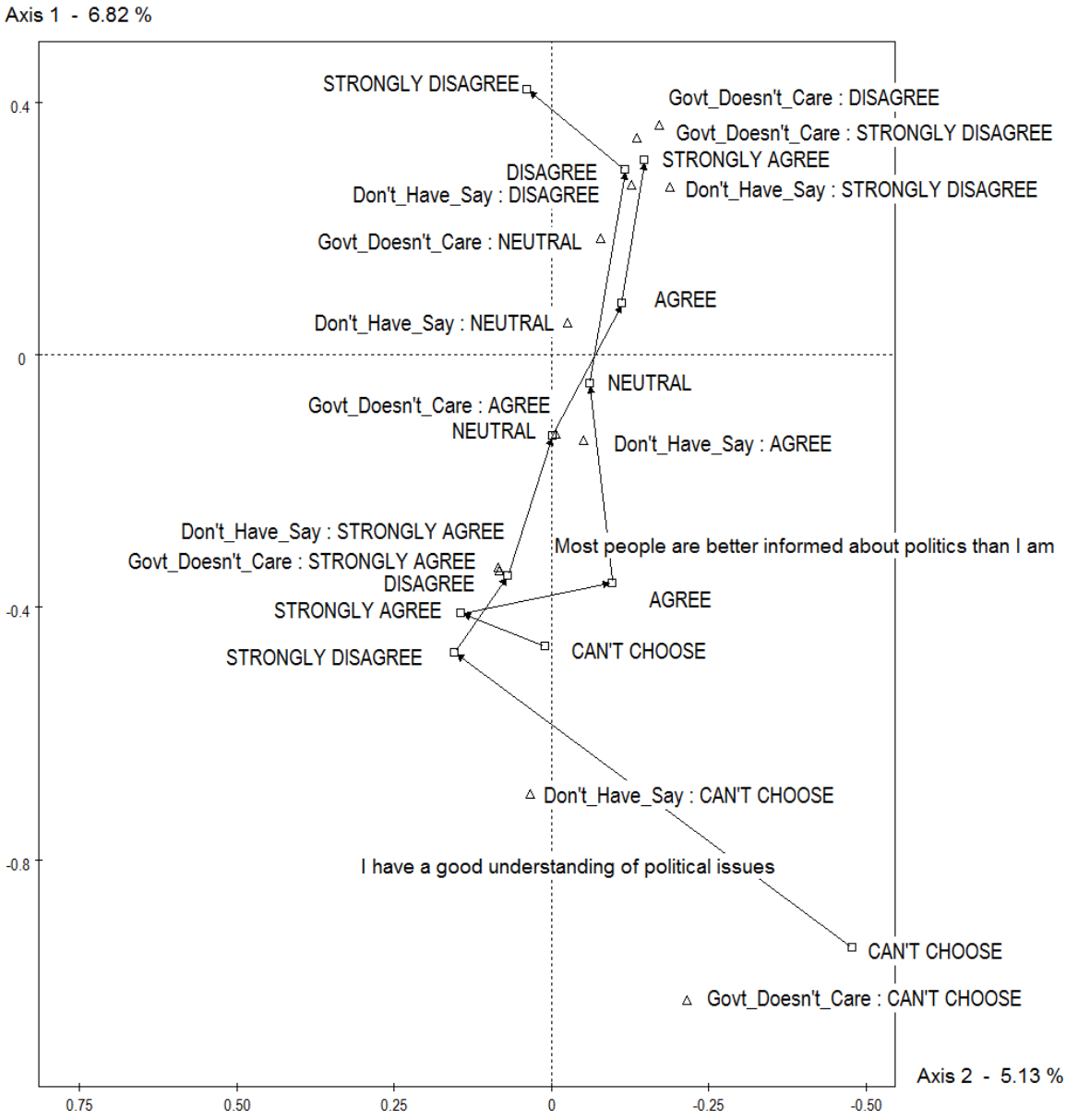


Figure 3 shows answers to four questions used to measure "political efficacy." While the concept of political efficacy is not identical in meaning to political competence, its operationalization in these items works well to gauge respondents' sense of their entitlement to participate in politics. The category points in Figure 4 represent agreement and disagreement with the statements "people like me don't have any say about what the government does" (Don't Have Say), "I don't think the government cares much what people like me think" (Gov't Doesn't Care), "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country," and "I think most people are better informed about politics and government than I am." All four questions' response category points move monotonically from the least-politically-competent responses, located among those with the least capital, to the most-politically-competent responses near the top of the figure. Those who say they "can't choose" a response to these questions are located, on average, among those with the least resources, as is the case with the "don't know" responses to political questions shown in Figure 2. Those who say they strongly disagree that "most peo-

ple" are better informed about politics and strongly agree that they possess a "good understanding" of politics tend to have the most resources; they are generally located in the same parts of the space as those who believe government *does* care about "people like" them and that they can have a say in political decision-making. The category points for all the responses indicating lower political competence are in the lower half of Figure 2; those with the least confidence in their knowledge of politics and their ability to influence their government tend to have the lowest volumes of capital. Again, we see a clear relationship between indicators of political competence and social position.

Conclusion

Responses to survey questions about politics, just like opinions people give about art, music, or other forms of cultural participation, are expressions of socially distinguished and distinguishing tastes. As Bourdieu (1991: 171-202) pointed out, the political field is a field of cultural and symbolic production; like tastes for other kinds of cultural objects, then, tastes for politics—and the probabilities of responding to survey questions, and of responding in specific ways—are structured by social position. But while most American cultural sociologists are comfortable with understanding certain kinds of cultural production as restricted to agents within the relevant fields, and with a relational analysis of the tastes and practices of those inside and outside those fields, these approaches to cultural production and reception have not been applied to American politics.

Volume of capital (Axis 1) clearly structures agents' political competence. Those with the least capital are least likely to vote and most likely to say "don't know" to political questions (and thus least likely to have their views represented accurately by political processes). The least-advantaged may not only lack the knowledge of politics needed to generate legitimate responses to political questions, they relate to politics, their survey-responses indicate, with the sense that they are not socially legitimated producers of political opinions: they lack political competence. Those with the most capital, on the other hand, are not only the most likely to answer political questions, they are also the most likely to vote and report the strongest levels of belief that they are capable of both understanding and influencing politics.

In this chapter, I have argued that both the theoretical insights and the empirical patterns described by Bourdieu in *Distinction* and "Public Opinion Does Not Exist" over thirty years ago apply to the American context. Much can be gained from bringing Bourdieu's insights and tools to the study of American politics, for both our understanding of popular relations to politics. The concept of political competence" brings together socially-stratified phenomena usually studied separately: feelings about politics, survey-question answering, and voting. These three aspects of political participation are all manifestations of individuals' sense of their place in the social order; those with more resources or capital are the most likely to feel they are legitimate participants in political decision-making, the most likely to express political opinions to survey interviewers, and the most likely to actually vote. These three elements of greater political competence are usually explained separately. Feelings of efficacy are most often attributed to individual socialization in the family, "don't know" responses to lack of education or interest, and non-voting to insufficient skills and material resources. All of these certainly influence these individual phenomena, but a person's basic sense of herself as warranting a place in national political discourse—her political competence—is a necessary precondition for any kind of political participation.

□

Daniel Laurison
Research Fellow in Sociology at London School of Economics

Abstract

The sense that one is a legitimate participant in political discourse, what Bourdieu (1984) termed "political competence," is an important precondition for political engagement and participation. In this article, I examine the stratification of political competence across social positions in the United States. Using General Social Survey data from 2000-2006, I deploy Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) to construct a representation of the American social space. I then project two sets of measures of political competence as supplementary variables into the space constructed with MCA. I show that political competence—indicated by saying "don't know" to political questions, and a series of questions designed to measure political efficacy—decreases with respondents' volume of capital, as does the propensity to report voting in Presidential elections.

Keywords

Political competence, voting, United States, inequality, and multiple correspondence analysis

List of References

Berinsky, A. J. 2004. *Silent Voices: Public Opinion and Political Participation in America*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Bishop, G. F., A. J Tuchfarber, and R. W Oldendick. 1986. Opinions on fictitious issues: The pressure to answer survey questions. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50(2):240.

Blasius, J. & J. Friedrichs. 2008. Lifestyles in distressed neighborhoods: A test of Bourdieu's 'taste of necessity' hypothesis. *Poetics* 36(1):24-44.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction. A social Critique of the judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1979. Public Opinion Does Not Exist. In *Communication and Class Struggle*, *an anthology. 1, Capitalism, imperialism*, Armand M. & S Siegelaub. 124-130. New York: International general.

Carpini, M. X. Delli, & S. Keeter. 1997. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Converse, J. M. 1976. Predicting No Opinion in the Polls. *Public Opinion Q* 40(4):515-530. Retrieved November 12, 2009.

Croteau, D. 1995. *Politics and the Class Divide: Working People and the Middle-Class Left*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Dyck, J. J., & E. L. Lascher. 2008. Direct Democracy and Political Efficacy Reconsidered. *Political Behavior* 31(3):401-427.

Eliasoph, N. 1998. *Avoiding politics: how Americans produce apathy in everyday life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Erikson, R., and J. H. Goldthorpe. 1992. *The constant flux: a study of class mobility in industrial societies*. Clarendon: Oxford University Press.

Fantasia, R. 1989. *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Francis, J. D. & L. Busch. 1975. What We Now Know About 'I Don't Knows'. *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 39(2):207-218.

Galston, W. A. 2001. Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education. *Annual Review of Political Science* 4(1):217-234.

Gaventa, J. 1980. *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gilens, M. 2005. Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69(5):778 -796.

Greenacre. 2006. *Multiple Correspondence Analysis and Related Methods*. electronic version. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis (http://cdsweb.cern.ch/record/1010874).

Halle, D. 1987. *America's Working Man: Work, Home, and Politics Among Blue Collar Property Owners*. University of Chicago Press.

Harrits, G. S., A Prieur, L. Rosenlund, & J. Skjott-Larsen. 2010. Class and Politics in Denmark: Are Both Old and New Politics Structured by Class? *Scandinavian Political Studies* 33(1):1-27.

Herbst, S. 1992. Surveys in the Public Sphere: Applying Bourdieu's Critique of Opinion Polls. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 4(3):220-229.

Jackman, R. W. 1970. A Note on Intelligence, Social Class, and Political Efficacy in Children. *The Journal of Politics* 32(04):984-989.

Krosnick, J. A, S. Narayan, & W. R. Smith. 1996. Satisficing in surveys: Initial evidence. *New Directions for Evaluation* 1996(70):29–44.

Laurison, D. 2013. The Distribution of Political Opinions in the United States. In *Trente ans après La Distinction*, ed. P Coulangen & J Duval. Editions La Découverte.

Lebaron, F. 2010. How Bourdieu 'Quantified' Bourdieu: The Geometric Modelling of Dat. In *Quantifying Theory: Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. K Robson & C Sanders, 11-29. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Leighley, J. E. 1995. Attitudes, Opportunities and Incentives: A Field Essay on Political Participation. *Political Research Quarterly* 48(1):181-209.

Levendusky, M. S. 2011. Rethinking the Role of Political Information. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75(1):42 -64.

Lukes, S. 1974. *Power: A Radical View*. London: Macmillan.

Luskin, R. C. 1987. Measuring Political Sophistication. *American Journal of Political Science* 31(4):856-899.

Mondak, J. J. 1999. Reconsidering the Measurement of Political Knowledge. *Political Analysis* 8(1):57 -82.

Niemi, R. G., S C. Craig & F. Mattei. 1991. Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study. *The American Political Science Review* 85(4):1407-1413.

Petersen, M. B., R Slothuus, & L. Togeby. 2010. Political Parties and Value Consistency in Public Opinion Formation. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 74(3):530 -550.

Pollock, P. H. III. 1983. The Participatory Consequences of Internal and External Political Efficacy: A Research Note. *The Western Political Quarterly* 36(3):400-409.

Popkin, S. L. 1991. *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*. Chicago and London: University Of Chicago Press.

Prieur, A., L. Rosenlund, & J Skjott-Larsen. 2008. Cultural capital today: A case study from Denmark. *Poetics* 36(1):45-71.

Prieur, A. & M Savage. 2011. "Updating cultural capital theory: A discussion based on studies in Denmark and in Britain." *Poetics* 39(6):566-580.

Rouanet, H., W. Ackermann & Brigitte Le Roux. 2000. The Geometric Analysis of Questionnaires: the Lesson of Bourdieu's La Distinction. *Bulletin de méthodologie sociologique* 65(1):5.

Le Roux, B., & H. Rouanet. 2009. *Multiple Correspondence Analysis*. London: Sage Publications, Inc.

Le Roux, B., H. Rouanet, M. Savage & A. Warde. 2008. Class and Cultural Division in the UK. *Sociology* 42(6):1049 -1071.

Soss, J. 1999. Lessons of Welfare: Policy Design, Political Learning, and Political Action. *The American Political Science Review* 93(2):363-380.

Swartz, D. L. 2006. Pierre Bourdieu and North American Political Sociology: Why He Doesnt Fit In But Should. *French Politics* 4(1):84-99.

Teixeira, R. A. 1992. *The Disappearing American Voter*. Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution.

Timpone, R. J. 1998. Structure, Behavior, and Voter Turnout in the United States. *The American Political Science Review* 92(1):145-158.

Verba, S., K. Lehman Schlozman, & H E Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Wacquant, L. 2001. The Penalisation of Poverty and the rise of Neo-Liberalism. *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 9(4):401-412.

Wacquant, L., ed. 2005. *Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics: The Mystery of Ministry*. Cambridge: Polity.

White, E. S. 1968. Intelligence and Sense of Political Efficacy in Children. *The Journal of Politics* 30(3):710-731.