

**Incorrect Voting in the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election: How Partisan and Economic Cues Fail to Help Low-Information Voters**

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**Abstract**

The importance of voting in undisputed, yet scholarly works attempting to understand the causes and consequences of incorrect voting are relatively scarce. Building on the works of Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006; Lau, Andersen, Redlawsk 2008), I design and implement a new survey method measuring incorrect voting I call Self-identified Incorrect Voting (SIV). This method allows survey respondents to determine for themselves if they voted incorrectly in the 2012 U.S. presidential election. I conducted the SIV survey of a national sample of voters and use the results to test traditional hypotheses regarding the value of partisanship and the economy as cues to help low-information voters behave in the same manner as high-information voters.

Key words: Election, Incorrect Voting, Cue, Partisanship

Paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association's annual meeting, April 2013.

*What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Hearts of America* (Frank 2004) spent more than two months on the New York Times best seller list in 2004. Its simple argument being that blue-collar America has been duped by the Republican Party into supporting politicians and policies antithetical to their own well being. Political pundits hailed it as the best book on politics of the year and others took its lessons and applied them to the reelection of George W. Bush that November (e.g., Kristof 2004; Seelye 2004; Wills 2004). Bartels' (2005b) subsequent dismantling of the book's central thesis and further analyses (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; Gelman 2008) showing that "the culture war," to the extent that it is happening at all, is happening across states at the top of the economic strata, have not diminished the popular belief that large segments of the American population do not know what is in their best interest and support, through voting, the wrong candidates. Yet despite significant public interest in this topic, scholarly work attempting to understand the phenomenon and implications of incorrect voting is still in its infancy.

Part of the reason there is such a large gap between public interest and scholarly production on the topic is that much of the work that touches on correct or incorrect participation (e.g., people voting for a candidate that they would not support if they had better knowledge of the candidates' policy positions) in politics is a byproduct of scholarly concern about the effects of varying levels of political knowledge. That is, researches are focused on explaining the causes (e.g., Esterling, Neblo, and Lazer 2011; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006) and consequences (e.g., MacDonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug 1995; Waldman and Jamieson 2003) of variance in political knowledge. For example, Bartels (1996) shows that incumbent presidential and Democratic presidential candidates did better in reality than they would have if all voters were fully informed. This is a fascinating result, which shows that incumbents and Democrats do

better among the ill-informed. It does not demonstrate that they have voted for the wrong candidate because it does not measure incorrect participation (see also Goren 1997). Thus, these types of works are clearly suggestive that there is a potential problem with voters seemingly participating in ways that are inconsistent with their personal interests and/or preferences, but the answers have been limited to the role of political knowledge.

Another reason for the relatively small amount of work directly focused on understanding correct/incorrect voting (rather than as a byproduct of political knowledge research) is the thorny problem of identifying how individuals ought to be voting. The scientific desire to be objective balks at what can appear to be pronouncements from the ivory tower about what simple minded voters should be doing. The very label “correct voting” smacks of elitism. In attempting to obviate the objective versus subjective nature of what is deemed to be correct, the works of Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006; Lau, Andersen, Redlawsk 2008) provide the most thorough scholarly treatment of the subject.

These works provide two separate methods of measuring correct/incorrect voting. The first, and most well known, is a method that utilizes existing surveys (i.e., ANES) to impute the respondents’ overall policy relationship to the two presidential candidates (Law and Redlawsk 1997; Lau, Andersen, Redlawsk 2008). Those individuals who voted for the presidential candidate closest to their own set of policy desires voted correctly, those that did not, voted incorrectly. This method allows individuals to provide their own policy positions rather than having the omniscient scientist decide what is in the best interest of the particular voter. It also allows for measuring correct/incorrect voting in real elections with readily available data. However, the researcher is still part of the process to determine the correctness of a vote. That is, the researcher is still determining how an individual is or should aggregate their disparate policy

concerns that stretch across varying numbers of issues and are held with varying levels of intensity.

The second method Lau and Redlawsk (2006) use is experimental and involves subjects observing fictitious elections and then voting for candidates in both a primary and general election. After the simulated election is over, subjects are given complete information about each of the candidates and asked if they would change their vote. The virtue here is that individuals themselves are the ones determining if they voted correctly or not. In this case, the researcher is entirely removed from determining the correctness of the vote. The problem is that the experimental setting is not the same as a real world campaign and thus the results are only suggestive of what is actually happening during an election.

In what follows I take the best parts of each of these lines of work (i.e., the individual deciding for themselves that they voted incorrectly from the experimental method and the applicability to the real world of presidential elections found in the survey method) and produce a survey experiment, which I refer to as Self-identified Incorrect Voting, that provides the first direct measure of the amount of correct/incorrect voting in a presidential election that takes the researcher out of the equation. This is done through a national survey administered after the 2012 U.S. presidential election. The survey was conducted less than two weeks after the election between November 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, while the campaign remained fresh in the minds of respondents.

The Self-identified Incorrect Voting survey consisted of two parts. The first part contains standard survey questions using ANES wording that elicit typical demographic information along with partisanship, ideology, political knowledge and personal and sociotropic beliefs about

the economy. The key question asks the respondents' presidential vote choice. The second part is a set of policy positions for two fictitious candidates for office corresponding to the positions of both Obama and Romney (subjects are not told their names or party affiliation). Respondents then indicate who they would vote for based solely on these sets of policy positions. Agreement or disagreement between the actual vote and the candidate chosen based on issue positions provides the measure of correct/incorrect voting. This way, each voter determines for themselves if they voted correctly or not. The result is a new way to measure correct/incorrect voting and frees scholars from the limits of existing surveys designed for other purposes.

While of critical importance to a complete understanding of the functioning of democratic governmental systems, the value of this work is not limited to simply measuring correct/incorrect voting. In what follows I will apply this new Self-identified Incorrect Voting data set to test hypotheses related to the great debate in the political knowledge literature regarding the value of cues and heuristics as substitutes for actual political knowledge. Two of the most commonly pointed to cues are partisanship and the state of the economy. Scholars have argued that cues can be used by low information voters in order allow them to behave as if they were high information voters (Popkin 1994). However, there is a lack of scholarly work directly testing the idea that the use of cues leads to a decrease in the probability of voting incorrectly.

In what follows, I test hypotheses regarding voters' ability to use cues to choose the candidate who best matches their own set of issue positions. I find (1) that as strength of partisanship increases, the probability of voting incorrectly also increases and (2) that the more one feels their personal economic wellbeing has improved, the more likely one is to vote incorrectly for the incumbent president (Obama in this case). All told, these findings indicated

that more than 20 percent of voters did so incorrectly and that cues, such as party identification and pocketbook economic beliefs, drive voters to the wrong candidates.

### **1. Political Participation: Right or Wrong?**

The ideal democratic government is put in place by a well informed democratic citizenry (Barber 1984). Unfortunately, from ancient to modern times scholars and theorists have despaired at just how far the average citizen falls short of the democratic ideal (e.g., Aristotle 1984; Converse 1990). In their classic work, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) demonstrate quite conclusively how little factual political knowledge the average American possesses. However, political theorists' concerns for the democratic citizen are not limited to simply a measure of their political knowledge, but also the source. Rousseau (1988) argues forcefully for a model of direct democracy, but recognizes that individual will can be subverted by factions, saying: "But when factions, partial associations, are formed at the expense of the greater one, the will of each of the associations becomes general with respect to its members, and particular with respect to the state; it may then be said that there are no longer as many voters as men, but only as many as there are associations" (101). Thus, it is not just a matter of having or not having the right amount of political knowledge, but also the groups (e.g., political parties) one identifies with that can lead citizens to vote against their own interest or beliefs.

For those apprehensive about the quality of political participation, there are two potential problems. First is a concern that people have policy preferences, but lack sufficient knowledge about the available choices when they are participating in politics (in the case of voting, this is insufficient knowledge about the candidates). As a result, they may fail to choose the correct option (e.g., Lau, Andersen, Redlawsk 2008). Therefore, there is the possibility that the wrong

candidate could win or a ballot initiative could fail to pass when it should. The second problem is a more fundamental concern with people adopting policy preferences that are not in their own best interest. For example, Bartels (2005a) discusses popular support for the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts, which primarily benefited the wealthy. In this case, people understand their options, i.e., tax cut or not tax cut, but they do not understand which option is in their best interest. This can result in the wrong candidate winning or a failed ballot initiative even when individuals are fully informed of their options.

Scholarly works focused on political knowledge tend to fall into the second category of concerns with political participation. This is a large body of work and has provided the most insight into how the potential for incorrect political participation may be manifesting itself in the real world. Even though it does not explicitly state it, much of this work implies or assumes that less well informed voters ought to have the same policy beliefs as better informed individuals who are like them demographically. Thus, for these scholars, some individuals simply hold the wrong beliefs. For example, Althaus (1998) shows that public opinion polls, which purport to measure what the public thinks about a particular topic, would find much different results if all citizens were well informed (see also Gilens 2001). Bartels (2005a) demonstrates that well informed individuals' opinions on tax cuts differed systematically from the less informed and that if the less informed were suddenly more informed, overall support for the tax cuts would have dropped. In a more general sense, Michaud, Carlisle, and Smith (2009) show that individuals with low levels of political knowledge fail to demonstrate coherent world views.<sup>1</sup> The simple lesson to be learned, from these and the many other works focused on political

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that some more recent work has suggested that methodological choices may be overstating the effects of political information (Green et al. 2011; Levendusky 2011).

knowledge, is that low levels of political knowledge can lead to citizens who participate in politics in a seemingly incoherent manner, if they participate at all.

While the political knowledge literature paints a rather bleak picture of the political landscape, scholars have advanced psychological concepts such as cues and heuristics as a way to rehabilitate the reputation of the average voter. In these works, it is acknowledged that individuals have little factual knowledge of the political process, but argued that such knowledge is unnecessary. Individuals with low levels of political knowledge can participate in a similar fashion to those with higher levels by using low-information rational cues and heuristics (Popkin 1994; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). The party label is the best example of a simple cue that can help otherwise ignorant individuals behave as if they are knowledgeable (Campbell et al. 1960; Druckman 2001; Zaller 1992).

However, cues like party labels only help individuals participate correctly if they convey correct information. This is not always the case. For example, Arceneaux (2008) examines the role of party labels and finds that when candidates take positions inconsistent with what the party label would suggest (e.g., a pro-choice Republican), the ability of citizens to hold candidates accountable for this is contingent, once again, on political knowledge. While those advocating the value of cues and heuristics have demonstrated that in the right circumstances they can help individuals make higher quality political decisions, other work has shown that reliance on simple cues and devotion to decision making heuristics can just as easily separate individuals from reality (e.g., Darmofal 2005; Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Kuklinksi and Quirk (2000) do not doubt that citizens use heuristics, but that when people rely

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<sup>2</sup> This is a large problem, if we are concerned about individuals adopting policy preferences that are not in their own best interest (i.e., the second type of incorrect participation outlined above). Cues and heuristics cannot solve this problem.

on these types of decision making processes they “... use them unknowingly and automatically, and rarely worry about their accuracy” (156, see also Kuklinski and Hurley 1994).

One problem with both the political knowledge and heuristics literature, as it relates to incorrect political participation, is that these works are not directly measuring an actual occurrence of incorrect participation in something like voting. Even in work such as Waldman and Jamieson’s (2003), who show that ignorance of the presidential candidates’ actual policy positions hurt Gore at the ballot box, the analysis is based on aggregate statistics, not a measure of incorrect vote choice. Thus, much of the political knowledge and heuristics literature is ill suited to answering questions about the causes of incorrect participation because it does not attempt to measure the dependent variable. In other words, if one is trying to explain incorrect participation, then one needs to have a dependent variable that measures the incorrect participation in question.

## **2. Measuring Correct/Incorrect Votes**

In a series of works Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006; Lau, Andersen, Redlawsk 2008) present experimental and survey methods for measuring incorrect voting. They “...define a ‘correct’ vote decision as one that is the same as the choice which would have been made under conditions of full information. Ideally, this determination can best be made subjectively, by the voter, on an individual basis” (1997, 586). This definition contains two key elements. First, correct voting is the vote that would be made if the individual had complete information about the available options. Thus, these works are not concerned with whether or not individuals have the correct policy preferences in the first place, just that they implement those preferences by voting for the candidate that is most representative of those policy preferences. Second, it is best

to let the individual themselves determine if they voted correctly or not. Thus, to the extent possible, the researcher should not determine how an individual ought to vote.<sup>3</sup>

Lau and Redlawsk (2006) provide the most direct measure of correct/incorrect voting. In order to measure incorrect voting, they designed an experiment utilizing a dynamic information board (a computer program) to simulate a fictitious primary and general election. Participants viewed information on the board for a set period of time, which included commercial interruptions, and then chose a candidate. Subjects could pick and choose to view as much or as little of a topic as they wanted. However, the information was only randomly available. This resulted in participants only viewing a portion of the available information. Once the subjects chose their preferred candidate, they were asked to view all of the information available about each candidate and then asked if they would change their vote. Lau and Redlawsk found that nearly 30 percent would have chosen the other candidate.

The beauty of this approach is that it does not impose the views of the researcher on the correctness of the voter. The problem is with the external validity of the experiment and, ultimately, only suggests what could be going on in the real world of elections. The authors, of course, recognize these problems and produced a method called normative-naïve that utilizes standard survey data to measure correct/incorrect voting (see also, Lau, Anderson, and Redlawsk 2008). It is referred to as normative because it once again utilizes experts to place candidates' issue positions on a left to right political spectrum. It is naïve because it utilizes survey

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<sup>3</sup> Importantly, this second component of the definition does not necessarily preclude research focused on trying to measure and explain why some people may hold policy positions that do not sync with their personal interests. It simply requires that scholars measure the phenomenon in such a way that it would be the individuals themselves indicating that their policy preference is wrong.

respondents' answers to survey questions on various issues to place individual voters on the same left to right political spectrum.

The difficulty with this approach is the distinction between evaluations and choices. Questions in a survey ask respondents to evaluate an issue, a party, or a candidate. This is not the same as what voters are asked to do in the voting booth when they must make a choice. The choice being made is the result of how an individual voter combines all of these disparate evaluations on that particular day. This forces scholars to guess at how individuals combine the various pieces of information in their heads in order to make a choice. While the authors use statistical methods and the available questions in the survey tapping valance to guess how a voter combines these thoughts, it is still an educated guess. The value of defining correct voting as how someone would vote, if they had complete information, is that it not only lets individuals themselves determine if they were voting correctly, but allows scholars to compare actual voting behavior (i.e., voting with incomplete information) to the normative ideal democratic citizen (i.e., voting with complete information). The normative-naïve method does not do either of these things.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, I propose a new method to measure correct/incorrect voting that follows the path outlined by Lau and Redlawsk's experiment, but takes it out of the laboratory and utilizes actual campaigns during real world elections enhancing the external validity of this analysis. I call this method Self-identified Incorrect Voting (SIV) because it allows each respondent to determine for themselves whether or not they voted correctly in the actual election when

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<sup>4</sup> See Baum and Jamison (2006) and Sokhey and McClurg (2012) for further implementations of the survey method of measuring incorrect voting.

compared to the choice they would make if all the respondent knew was the various issue positions of the candidates.

The SIV method consists of a representative sample of voters, but instead of a fictitious campaign played out on a computer in a laboratory, this method takes advantage of an actual presidential election (in this case the 2012 election). In essence, the campaign itself becomes the laboratory. The survey is made up of two parts. First, it utilizes standard survey questions in a standard survey. This consists of basic demographic information (e.g., age, education, race, income, gender) and more specialized questions to tap theoretically important variables that may affect vote choice and correct voting (e.g., perceptions of the economy, partisanship, ideology, political sophistication). Of course, the key question is which presidential candidate the subject voted for in 2012.

Second, the survey supplies subjects with the policy positions of each of the presidential candidates without identifying which position goes with which candidate. This will allow for measuring incorrect voting independent of the personal characteristics of the candidates and, most importantly, partisanship. A comparison between the candidate chosen in the actual election to the one chosen based on policy positions alone provides the first direct measure of correct/incorrect voting, i.e., how voters would vote, given “complete” information. This becomes the dependent variable in the analysis below.

The value of the Self-identified Incorrect Voting method is that it is flexible. While here it is being used after a presidential election, it could just as easily be applied to any election, be it lower down the ballot in a congressional race or in another country. It is also not limited to elections to political office. It could easily measure correct versus incorrect voting on a state

ballot initiative or a country wide referendum on participation in something like the European Union. The SIV survey simply needs to capture, first, a voter's choice (and the well known primary drivers of that choice) and, second, offer the voter the same vote choice they made in the real world ballot box distilled to the key policy positions of the candidates (if an election for office) or key issues at stake (if the vote is on something like a ballot initiative or referendum). The result is to capture the behavior of individuals in the full complexity of the real world as compared to their behavior in a more sanitized world where the only considerations are those that have been held up as the democratic ideal, i.e., voting based on the cold calculation of the merits of the available options.

### *2.1 Expectations*

Here I will present seven hypotheses that will be tested by the results of the SIV survey following the 2012 presidential election, thus demonstrating the value of the method beyond measuring correct/incorrect voting. There are three pairs of hypotheses regarding the effect of cues on the probability of voting correctly/incorrectly (Hypotheses *H2-H7*). These are presented separately for two reasons. First, hypotheses *H2-H4* are conditional on political knowledge, while hypotheses *H5-H7* are not. Second, each of these hypotheses is tested independently. Thus, while these are competing hypotheses, I will not claim that failure to find evidence supporting one is the same as finding evidence in support of the other. The first hypothesis focuses directly on the effect of political knowledge, which has historically been the center of attention when it comes to the quality of political participation. The basic political knowledge hypothesis is:

*Hypothesis H1: As one's level of political knowledge increases, the probability of one voting incorrectly decreases.*

The great debate in the political knowledge literature is whether low-information rationale, such as the use of simple cues and heuristics, can substitute for actual political knowledge (Kam 2005; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1994; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). In other words, the average citizen's failure to score well on fact based political knowledge surveys is not a problem, if they can use cues and heuristics to vote "as if" they have this knowledge. Two of the most commonly pointed to low-information cues available to individuals during elections are the party label and economic performance (e.g., Fiorina 1979, Key 1966, Popkin 1994). If these cues provide the easy information necessary for individuals to participate in politics "as if" they had incurred the high costs of gaining political knowledge, then we should see these cues lead to less incorrect voting. The benefit of this survey method measuring correct/incorrect voting, is that it asks voters to choose based solely on issue positions, therefore stripping away all the low-information cues that voters may rely on. If cues are as helpful as some suggest, they should help voters apply their issue positions to the candidates in the real world. Since this method provides both these vote choices, I can test how well people do in the real world in choosing the correct candidate when compared to their choice based solely on issues

The effect of the partisan cue is rather straightforward, but conditional on political knowledge:

*Hypothesis H2: As one's level of political knowledge decreases and the strength of one's party identification increases, the probability of one voting incorrectly decreases.*

The hypothesized effect of the economy cue is more complex. Research has demonstrated that there are two distinct ways of thinking about the effect that concerns about the economy have on citizens' vote choices. First is the direct effect on individuals' pocketbooks, which equates to their personal economic wellbeing. The second is the more abstract concern about how the economy is performing overall (see Gomez and Wilson 2001; Killian, Schoen, and Dusso 2008). In addition, the effect that the economy has on vote choice has been demonstrated to be that voters either reward or punish the incumbent president (Key 1966; Kramer 1971; Norpoth 2001). While other work suggests that this is not a uniform process employed by all voters across all elections (e.g., Rudolph 2003), the effect that this cue would have (if utilized by voters at all) is to reward or punish the incumbent president. Therefore, a proper hypothesized relationship between the cue that the economy provides for people and their choices in the voting booth needs to account for these effects. When combined with the effect of political knowledge, this results in the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis H3:* As one's level of political knowledge decreases and their subjective belief about their personal economic wellbeing improves, the probability of one voting incorrectly for the incumbent president decreases.

*Hypothesis H4:* As one's level of political knowledge decreases and their subjective belief about the general state of the economy improves, the probability of one voting incorrectly for the incumbent president decreases.

Hypothesis *H1* reflects the important direct influence political knowledge is expected to have on the correctness of one's vote. Hypotheses *H2-H4* represent the conditional effect that cues are expected to have on voting behavior. Importantly, cues are expected to play a

significant role in the voting behavior of low information voters. Of course, high information voters may or may not use cues themselves, but the key is they are not necessary and would lead to the same choice. Thus, the hypothesized effect is supposed to be most pronounced among the relatively ill-informed.

The opposite argument is put forth by Kuklinki and Quirk (2000) that "...people indeed do use heuristics, but hardly as rational strategies specifically tailored to each kind of decision. Rather, people take their heuristics off the shelf, use them unknowingly and automatically, and rarely worry about their accuracy. An inherent part of human nature, these broader, less discriminating sorts of heuristics generally trump strategic decision making" (156). This suggests that the use of cues and heuristics has little to do with a motive to make accurate choices and is not conditional on levels of political knowledge. As a result, the following three hypotheses are suggested:

*Hypothesis H5:* As the strength of one's party identification increases, the probability of one voting incorrectly increases.

*Hypothesis H6:* As one's subjective belief about their personal economic wellbeing improves, the probability of one voting incorrectly for the incumbent president increases.

*Hypothesis H7:* As one's subjective belief about the general state of the economy improves, the probability of one voting incorrectly the incumbent president increases.

### **3. Data and Methods**

In order to test this new method of measuring incorrect voting and test the seven hypothesized relationships between cue/heuristic use and incorrect voting, a national the SIV

survey of voters was implemented following the 2012 presidential election, November 15-19. The survey was hosted and designed in Qualtrics' online survey research suite. Sampling was done through Survey Sampling International's (SSI) online sampling approach.<sup>5</sup> SSI was founded in 1977 and maintains 34 ongoing panels to form the core of its online sample. Knowing the potential problem with selection bias inherent in an opt-in online survey, SSI improves the quality of its sample by further recruiting participants from online communities, social networks, and websites of all types. In doing so, SSI can potentially reach anyone online through their network of relationships with these online communities, websites, and social media groups. SSI insures the representativeness of the sample and minimizes the risk of bias through a three-stage randomization process. First, participants are randomly selected from SSI's panels to be invited to take a survey, and these participants are combined with others entering SSI's sampling platform after responding to online messaging (through invitations of all types, including e-mail, SMS, text, telephone, banner ads, and messaging on websites and online communities). Second, a set of profiling questions (never affirmation questions) is randomly selected for them to answer. Third, upon completion participants are matched with a survey they are likely to be able to take, using a further element of randomization.<sup>6</sup>

For this work, a sample of voters in the 2012 presidential election was selected. Wherever possible the survey questions<sup>7</sup> were direct copies of the wording used in ANES surveys, e.g., all demographic questions, questions designed to measure party identification, ideology, thoughts about the economy, and political knowledge. For the second part of the survey, which includes the issue positions of the two presidential candidates, I utilized Project

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<sup>5</sup> SSI has been used by scholars in many other works in the field (e.g., Esterling, Neblo, and Lazer 2011; Fahimi, Kulp, and Brick 2009; Malhotra and Margalit 2010; Popp and Rudolph 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Further information on SSI's sampling process was provided to the author and is available upon request.

<sup>7</sup> A copy of the full survey is available from the author upon request.

Vote Smart's identification of both Obama and Romney's positions on issues using 15 questions.<sup>8</sup> The questions used can be found in Table A1 of the appendix. Project Vote Smart's Political Courage Test includes 20 different questions. These consist of 20 simple yes or no questions that, ideally, each candidate would answer. Candidates for political office at the highest levels are less and less willing to be pinned down to clear issue positions and so neither Obama nor Romney were willing to answer these questions. As a result, Project Vote Smart imputed their answers based on extensive research on their past history in office and political statements. They have fully documented their research.<sup>9</sup> The 15 questions were presented in random order to each respondent, both when they were asked the questions directly for their own response to them and when they were presented the answers that Obama and Romney would have given (Tourangeau, Couper, and Conrad 2013).

The value of Project Vote Smart's work is that they have identified simple yes or no questions on important issues, which I could first ask each respondent in order to measure their personal policy preferences. Then I provided respondents with how Obama and Romney (Candidate 1 and Candidate 2) would have answered these questions. When beginning this section of the survey, respondents were provided with the following instructions:

Now you will be provided with the issue positions of two fictitious candidates for political office: Candidate 1 and Candidate 2. Please examine the 15 issue positions of each candidate **as long as you would like**. When you are finished, please answer the question about the two candidates at the bottom of the page.

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<sup>8</sup> Only 15 of the 20 questions were used because in one instance they could not pin down how Obama would have answered the question and in the other four instances the two candidates agreed. Thus, only the 15 issues upon which the two candidates disagreed were used. A list of the 15 questions used can be found in Table A1 of the appendix.

<sup>9</sup> This is available on their website or from the author.

After looking at the candidate answers to the same questions they had just been asked, respondents were asked who they would vote for. This consisted of three options Candidate 1, Candidate 2, or Don't know.<sup>10</sup> Those respondents who selected "Don't know" were asked a follow-up question that forced them to choose between the two candidates.<sup>11</sup>

\*\*\*Table 1 about here\*\*\*

Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of the sample of 1751 voters as compared to the Associated Press' exit polling conducted in 350 places and comprising 26,000 Election Day voters. As can be seen, this sample appears to be a bit less wealthy and a little older, on average, than AP's exit polling sample. All told, the survey's distribution seems to be broadly similar to that of the AP's.

Further evidence supporting the face validity of the SIV survey sample and the online process comes from the respondents' behavior when asked a series of questions to illicit their partisanship. It is well established that a simple survey question asking individuals if they identify as a Republican, Democrat, or independent will produce a result that over estimates the number of true independents (Keith et al. 1992) and that follow-up questions will bring the number of true independents down to 5-10 percent. Following ANES question wording, the

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<sup>10</sup> The Candidate 1 and Candidate 2 options were randomized. So some people saw Candidate 2 listed first and some saw Candidate 1 listed first among the options. This was done to control for the potential bias towards the first option.

<sup>11</sup> I included this second step in order to control for simple guesses on the part of respondents. In other words, in the following analysis of incorrect voting, I can include a dummy variable indicating that the respondent answered "Don't know" to the first question. If I had forced everyone to choose between the two candidates on the first question, I would not have the ability to distinguish between those who had a genuine preference and those who did not. Since this survey includes only those who voted in the actual election, when they entered the voting booth they were forced to choose. In the real world of voting, we do not have the ability to know who was essentially guessing when they voted. Presumably, those who are guessing in the voting booth would be more likely to vote incorrectly. In this survey I do have a method to identify who is guessing and the results support the supposition. Those who answered "Don't know" first, were significantly more likely to vote incorrectly on the follow-up question than those who were able to choose a candidate on the first question.

author first asked respondents if they think of themselves as Republican, Democrat, Independent, Other party, No Preference, or Don't know. This produced 28.44 percent saying something other than Republican or Democrat. In the follow-up question, anyone answering Independent, Other party, No Preference, Don't know was asked if they think of themselves as closer to the Republicans or Democrats (with an option to select Other and type in a response). Of these 497 individuals, 80 percent thought of themselves as closer to one of the two parties. After all of the questions regarding party identification were combined, which included follow-up questions to Democrats and Republicans to ascertain the strength of their commitment, the proportion of true independents in this survey is 5.88 percent, which is consistent with past work. This suggests that respondents understood the questions in a similar fashion to other methods of implementing a survey, such as phone or in person.

In total, the following regression analyses contain variables from the survey measuring standard demographic variables (race/ethnicity, gender, age, income and educational attainment), known predictors of vote choice (partisanship, ideology, pocketbook and sociotropic beliefs about the economy, and political knowledge), two variables suggested by Lau, Anderson, and Redlawsk (2008) as predictors of incorrect voting (first, a variable measuring the complexity of the electoral context in each state and, second, a measure of how strongly voters feel about their choice for president), and finally, one control variable inserted into the survey in order to control for respondents guessing when choosing between the two fictitious candidates' issue positions. Table A2 in the appendix contains coding rules for each of the variables utilized in the following regressions.

\*\*\*Table 2 about here\*\*\*

#### 4. Results

Table 2 presents descriptive results from the SIV survey relating to the dependent variable, i.e., whether respondents voted correctly or incorrectly during the actual presidential election when compared to who they would have chosen based on the candidates' policy positions. As can be seen, a slightly larger percentage of Romney voters (23.44) voted incorrectly than Obama voters (21.05). In addition, slightly more Republican identifiers (23.22) voted incorrectly than did Democrats (20.65), while both were trumped by independents (28.57). When it comes to race and ethnicity, the results suggest Asians (29.41) voted incorrectly to a higher degree than other groups, with whites (19.91) voting incorrectly the least. And, finally, women (22.79) voted incorrectly slightly more than men (21.03). The Pearson  $\chi^2$  results indicate that the only significant bivariate relationship occurs when considering the race and ethnicity of the respondents (Part C).

The summary results in Table 2 suggest a picture consistent with past work on incorrect voting. The works of Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006; Lau, Andersen, Redlawsk 2008) have demonstrated that 20-30 percent of voters may be doing so incorrectly and these results fall within that range. Importantly, the only other measurement method rarely demonstrated that incorrect voting is systematically favoring or hurting one particular candidate. The incorrect votes gained by one candidate are largely cancelled out by incorrect votes gained by the other candidate. Thus, the result of this election would not change.

\*\*\*\*Table 3 about here\*\*\*\*

Table 3 presents results after estimating four logit models. Models 1 and 2 estimate the logged odds of voting incorrectly in general, while Models 3 and 4 estimate the logged odds of

voting incorrectly for Obama. The coefficient on the variable measuring political knowledge in Model 1 tests hypothesis *H1*. As expected, this coefficient is highly significant and properly signed. As one's level of political knowledge increases, one is significantly less likely to vote incorrectly. Of course, this is the most basic supposition of the role of political knowledge and the strong result lends credibility to the findings.

Hypotheses *H2*, *H3*, *H5*, and *H6* all make predictions about the role of the economy as a cue and its likelihood of increasing or decreasing the probability that voters will vote incorrectly for the incumbent president (i.e., Obama). Models 3 and 4 test these hypotheses. *H3* and *H4* hypothesize that the use of cues is contingent on having low levels of political knowledge and that these cues help otherwise uninformed voters behave as if they are well informed. *H3* is tested in Model 3 with the coefficients on the variables tapping pocketbook economic beliefs (Pocketbook Econ) and the interaction between political knowledge and pocketbook (Knowledge X Pocket). The interaction fails to reach significance, which indicates that the effect of one's pocketbook economic beliefs is not dependent on the value of political knowledge. The coefficient on pocketbook economic beliefs is highly significant, but does not have the predicted sign. This indicates that when the value of political knowledge is zero, the more one believes their personal economic wellbeing has increased, the more likely one is to vote incorrectly for Obama.<sup>12</sup> Therefore I cannot reject the null hypothesis and accept *H3* because the effect of personal economic beliefs does not appear to depend on one's level of political knowledge.

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<sup>12</sup> Model 3 was also estimated substituting a mean centered political knowledge variable and interaction with pocketbook beliefs and the results held. Once again, the interaction did not reach significance and the partial effect (which in this case means the effect of pocketbook beliefs when political knowledge is at the mean) was highly significant.

Hypothesis *H4* is similar to *H3* except it focuses on respondents' beliefs about how the economy is doing as a whole. This hypothesis is tested in Model 4 with the coefficients on sociotropic economic beliefs (Sociotropic Econ) and the interaction between it and political knowledge (Knowledge X Socio). In this case, neither the interaction nor the partial effect variables reach significance.<sup>13</sup> This indicates that we, once again, cannot reject the null hypothesis. All told, there is little evidence in these models that the economy (as a cue) helps low-information voters vote correctly.

Hypotheses *H6* and *H7* present an alternative view of the cue the economy provides for individuals. *H6* focuses on pocketbook evaluations and is tested in Model 4. The coefficient on the variable Pocketbook Econ has the expected sign and is highly significant. This indicates, *ceteris paribus*, that the more one believes their personal financial wellbeing has improved, the more likely one is to vote incorrectly for Obama. This lends strong support to Kuklinki and Quirk's (2000) supposition that cues are used unconsciously with little concern for their validity or applicability to the decision task. Hypothesis *H7* focuses on sociotropic beliefs about the economy and is tested in Model 3. As can be seen, the coefficient on Sociotropic Econ has the proper sign, but fails to reach significance.

The final two hypotheses are concerned with the effect of party identification as a cue measured by the strength of party identification (Strength of PID). Hypothesis *H2* predicts that party labels will be used by low-information voters in order to reduce their likelihood of voting incorrectly. This is tested in Model 2. The coefficients on the partial effect (Strength of PID) and the interaction (Knowledge X PID) both reach significance. However, the sign on the partial effect variable is not what was predicted. The interpretation of this coefficient is that when

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<sup>13</sup> A joint hypothesis test that they are both equal to zero also failed to reach significance.

political knowledge equals zero, the stronger one's PID, the more likely one is to vote incorrectly. Hypothesis *H5* is similarly dealing with the effect of partisanship except it predicts that as strength of PID goes up, the probability of voting incorrectly goes up. Model 1 provides a test of this hypothesis. The coefficient on the variable Strength of PID is properly signed, but does not reach significance. Therefore, neither *H2* nor *H5* find complete support in this data.

However, the results of Model 2 are very interesting in that the effect of the PID cue is to increase the likelihood of voting incorrectly, but that this effect is conditional on individuals' having low levels of political knowledge. While neither of the traditional hypotheses regarding the effect of partisanship predicted this exact result, it does seem in-line with the nature of Kuklinki and Quirk's (2000) concerns about the value of cues. In order to further explore this idea, Model 2 was re-estimated<sup>14</sup> with a political knowledge variable and interaction centered on political knowledge's mean (4.4 on the 9 point scale). The coefficient on the partial effect variable, which now means the effect of strength of PID when political knowledge is 4.4, was not significant. Finally, the model was estimated a third time with the political knowledge variable centered at one standard deviation below the mean (2.2). In this case the partial effect variable (now meaning the effect of strength of PID when political knowledge equals 2.2) was significant. These results are important because they suggest that party identification is indeed used by low-information voters (i.e., those with political knowledge scores one standard deviation below the mean or more) as a voting cue, but that this cue leads them to vote in a manner inconsistent with their policy preferences.

## **5. Discussion**

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<sup>14</sup> The complete results of this estimation are available from the author, but not presented here.

Scholars have paid less attention to the quality of voting it deserves, given how fundamentally important it is to the successful functioning of a democracy. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, countries across the globe have embraced the idea that voting is the best way to determine who governs. More recently the occurrence of what is known collectively as the Arab Spring has once again seen the push for democracy and voting. While voting for representatives may be preferable to the alternative, it is not a magic bullet. The results presented here and elsewhere consistently indicate that between 20 and 30 percent of American voters vote incorrectly. This is happening in the highest profile election in what is typically considered a mature democracy. If this is the case in the U.S., then what can one expect of new democracies in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Egypt? Do the people winning elections actually represent the policy wishes of the people voting? Pointing to the fact that someone won an election is not good enough evidence to demonstrate that this winner represents the policy beliefs of the voters.

The current state of research on correct/incorrect voting consists of a single method to measure it during elections (Lau and Redlawsk 1997, 2006; Lau, Andersen, Redlawsk 2008). This involves an innovative use of existing ANES surveys to impute respondents' policy positions and how they aggregate them. It then places them on a spectrum to determine which candidate they are closest too and, therefore, should vote for. While this method does an excellent job of using available sources in order to measure a phenomenon that had yet to be measured outside of experimental settings, it leaves the door open for improvement.

Building on Lau and Redlawsk's work, I have designed the Self-identified Incorrect Voting method to measure incorrect voting in real world elections that includes a critical missing component to the current method. This component lets the voters themselves decide if they have voted correctly or not. Lau and Redlawsk indicate that the determination of a correct or incorrect

vote can "...best be made subjectively, by the voter, on an individual basis" (1997, 586). The survey implemented here lets respondents make this determination. This allows for the idiosyncrasies of individual decision making, while not imposing academic standards for choosing candidates.

Of course, no measurement is perfect and getting at complex subjects like correct/incorrect voting from multiple directions is what strengthens the scientific endeavor. The results of the new SIV method presented here have produced results consistent with Lau, Andersen, and Redlawsk (2008) in the following three ways. (1) Political knowledge leads to less incorrect voting. (2) The coefficient on the control variable in Table 3 measuring strength of preference for either Obama or Romney indicates in all four models that respondents that had a strong preference were significantly more likely to vote correctly. And finally, (3) the overall percentage of incorrect votes during the 2012 presidential election is around 22 percent, which falls within the typical range found by Law and Redlawsk.

However, the SIV survey also produces results that are less consistent. Lau and Redlawsk had hypothesized that larger numbers of high profile statewide races will decrease the probability of voting correctly. Here this holds true when predicting voting incorrectly for Obama (see the control variable Context Complexity in Models 3 and 4 in Table 3), but is not generally the case (same variable in Models 1 and 2 in Table 3). They also predict that cues and heuristics help individuals vote correctly and that these cues are best utilized by political experts. The results here fail to find this relationship when it comes to party identification and the economy. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case. High knowledge voters do not need cues at all, while the stronger low-information voters identify with a party, the more likely they are to vote incorrectly.

This finding regarding the effect of party identification is particularly troubling. It is consistent with the theoretical idea that partisanship works as filter for citizens (Campbell et al. 1960; Miller and Shanks 1996). That is, people put on their party glasses and see the world through them. However, this may not simply be a filter, but a barrier to voting correctly. Part of the psychological filter idea is that it causes or changes individuals' policy positions so that they are in line with the partisan message. If this is true, then partisanship should help voters choose the proper candidate in relation to who they would choose, if all they knew were the policy positions of the candidates. That is, for the high functioning low-information voter, partisanship and issue positions are supposed to align. But that is not the case here. When low-information voters were asked in the survey to choose between the two candidates based solely on the candidates' issue positions subjects choose one candidate, but the more the strength of their partisanship increased the higher the probability that these same individuals would chose the other candidate in the actual presidential election. This suggests that partisanship led them down the wrong path when trying to connect their personal issue beliefs to presidential candidates.

The results regarding the value of the economy as a cue also cast serious doubt on the notion that cues help low-information voters behave in the same manner as they would if they were high-information voters. The four models presented fail to find support for the notion that the economy provides a valuable cue to low-information voters. In fact, it appears that as individuals' subjective beliefs about their personal financial wellbeing improve, people are more likely to vote incorrectly for Obama (Model 4 in Table 3) and more likely to vote incorrectly in general (Model 1 in Table 3). Although sociotropic economic beliefs did not have a significant influence on incorrectly voting for Obama (Models 3 and 4 in Table 3), they did decrease the likelihood of voting incorrectly overall (Model 1 in Table 2), but not conditional on the level of

political knowledge. Rather than suggesting that sociotropic views are a valuable cue, this result suggests that feeling better about the overall state of the economy simply reduces the importance of the economy as an issue in the minds of voters. This is because voters are more likely to vote correctly in general, rather than being more likely to vote correctly for the incumbent president. If the economy remained an important cue, this would surely lead to rewarding the incumbent president, as it does with pocketbook views. But it does not. This result deserves further exploration.

Finally, there are a number of results from the SIV survey for the control variables that are interesting, but left unexplored here, which deserve further examination. This can be done with simple tweaks to the questions used in the SIV survey method presented here. The control variables in Table 3 indicate that (1) minorities were more likely to vote incorrectly. Is this because having an African-American candidate provided a cue that lead voters away from their policy preferences? (2) Unlike the simple bivariate relationship in Table 2, men were found to be more likely to vote incorrectly than women. Does this suggest that the voting gender gap has been created by men voting against their own policy preferences? (3) In addition, it appears that the older one gets, the more likely one is to vote incorrectly. Is there a missing intervening variable driving this relationship?

Of course, the null findings for education and income are also interesting. Education is often pointed to as the great solution to generally low civic knowledge, yet these results fail to find a significant relationship between education and voting correctly. Perhaps the solution to incorrect voting is not going to be found in the classroom, but in fostering civic minded interest in citizens such that they become more interested in politics and, therefore, more knowledgeable. In the end, the process of parsing the causes and effects of incorrect voting is still in its infancy.

Far more work is needed on the subject, which is of vital importance to a complete understanding of the pros and cons of electoral systems. The Self-identified Incorrect Voting survey method presented here can allow scholars to do exactly this by freeing them from the confines of existing surveys like the ANES, which were not designed to measure incorrect voting.

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**Table 1**

**Comparing the Demographic Distribution of the Self-Identified Incorrect Voting Survey Sample to AP's Exit Poll**

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	AP Exit Poll	Survey Sample
Gender		
Male %	47	48
Female %	53	52
Race/Ethnicity		
White	72	73
African-American	13	15
Hispanic/Latino	10	8
Asian	3	3
Other	2	1
Age		
18-24	11	10
25-29	8	6
30-39	17	14
40-49	20	18
50-64	28	35
65 and over	16	17
Income (in thousands of \$)		
Under 50	41	48
50-99.999	31	35
100 or more	28	16
Education		
No High School	3	2
High School Graduate	21	19
Some College/Assoc. Deg.	29	32
College Grad	29	29
Post Graduate	18	18

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Notes: Each column is in percent

**Table 2**  
**Descriptive Results of the Self-Identified Incorrect Voting Survey**

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Part A: Proportion of Correct and Incorrect Voters by Presidential Candidate

	Obama	Romney	Total
Correct	78.95	76.56	78.09
Incorrect	21.05	23.44	21.91

Pearson  $\chi^2 = 1.30$ , Pr = 0.25

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Part B: Proportion of Correct and Incorrect Voters by Party Identification

	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Total
Correct	76.78	79.35	71.43	78.07
Incorrect	23.22	20.65	28.57	21.93

Pearson  $\chi^2 = 3.53$ , Pr = 0.17

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Part C: Proportion of Correct and Incorrect Voters by Race and Ethnicity

	White	Af.-Am.	Hispanic	Asian	Total
Correct	80.09	72.49	75.83	70.59	78.12
Incorrect	19.91	27.51	24.17	29.41	21.88

Pearson  $\chi^2 = 11.49$ , Pr = 0.042

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Part D: Proportion of Correct and Incorrect Voters by Gender

	Men	Women	Total
Correct	77.21	78.97	78.12
Incorrect	21.03	22.79	21.88

Pearson  $\chi^2 = 0.77$ , Pr = 0.380

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**Table 3**  
**Logit Estimates Predicting Voting Incorrectly During the 2012 Presidential Election**

Variable	Model 1 <sup>†</sup> No Interactions	Model 2 <sup>†</sup> PID Interaction	Model 3 <sup>†</sup> Pocketbook Interaction	Model 4 <sup>†</sup> Sociotropic Interaction
Pol. Knowledge	-0.29*** (0.03)	-0.13 (0.08)	-0.25*** (0.05)	-0.28*** (0.04)
Strength of PID	0.09 (0.09)	0.40* (0.16)	0.14 (0.09)	0.14 (0.09)
Pocketbook Econ.	0.024** (0.08)	0.24** (0.08)	0.58*** (0.16)	0.42*** (0.10)
Sociotropic Econ.	-0.21** (0.07)	-0.21** (0.07)	0.10 (0.09)	0.11 (0.18)
Knowledge X PID		-0.08** (0.03)		
Knowledge X Pocket.			-0.04 (0.04)	
Knowledge X Socio.				-0.00 (0.04)
<i>Controls</i>				
Minority	0.24 (0.15)	0.21 (0.16)	0.79*** (0.20)	0.78*** (0.20)
Man	0.49** (0.14)	0.47** (0.14)	0.35* (0.17)	0.36* (0.17)
Age	0.08* (0.04)	0.08* (0.04)	0.09* (0.05)	0.09* (0.05)
Income	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Education	0.07 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	0.01 (0.08)	0.01 (0.08)
Strength of Ideology	-0.17** (0.06)	-0.16** (0.06)	-0.16** (0.07)	-0.15* (0.07)
Strong Preference	-0.33* (0.15)	-0.34* (0.15)	-0.43* (0.21)	-0.43* (0.21)
Context Complexity	0.08 (0.08)	0.09 (0.08)	0.26** (0.09)	0.26** (0.09)
Unsure of Choice based on issue positions	1.00*** (0.17)	1.00*** (0.16)	0.74*** (0.23)	0.73*** (0.23)
Constant	-1.01*** (0.24)	-1.62*** (0.33)	-2.09*** (0.39)	-2.00*** (0.37)
Log pseudolikelihood	-715.4	-712.9	-503.4	-504.0
N	1556	1556	1556	1556
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.11	0.11	0.14	0.14

Notes: Logit estimates with clustering by state of residence. \* = p < .05, \*\* = p < .01, \*\*\* = p < .001, one-tailed  
<sup>†</sup> Models 1 & 2 DV = Incorrect Vote; Models 3 & 4 DV = Incorrect Vote for Obama.

## Appendix

**Table A1: Questions used in the Self-Identified Incorrect Voting Survey from Project Vote Smart's Political Courage Test**

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1. Do you generally support pro-choice or pro-life legislation?
2. In order to balance the budget, do you support reducing defense spending?
3. In order to balance the budget, do you support an income tax increase on any tax bracket?
4. In order to balance the budget, do you support reducing Medicaid spending?
5. In order to balance the budget, do you support reducing Medicare spending?
6. Do you support federal spending as a means of promoting economic growth?
7. Do you support requiring states to implement education reforms in order to be eligible for competitive federal grants?
8. Do you support federal regulation of greenhouse gas emissions?
9. Do you support reducing restrictions on offshore energy production?
10. Do you support restrictions on the purchase and possession of guns?
11. Do you support repealing the 2010 Affordable Care Act?
12. Should individuals be required to purchase health insurance, as mandated in the 2010 Affordable Care Act?
13. Do you support same-sex marriage?
14. Do you support allowing individuals to divert a portion of their Social Security taxes into personal retirement accounts?
15. Do you support requiring illegal immigrants to return to their country of origin before they are eligible for citizenship?

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Note: These questions were randomized. When respondents were first directly asked each question, they received them in random order. When they saw how Obama and Romney would have answered, they were also presented in random order.

**Table A2: Coding for Each Variable Included in Analysis**

Variable	Type	Description
Minority	Dummy	1 = Nonwhite, 0 = White
Male	Dummy	1= Male, 0= Female
Ideological Strength	4 Point Scale	Ranges from 0=None to 4= Strong; Created by Folding the Standard 7 pt. Ideological scale
Personal Econ.	5 Point Scale	-2 = Much Worse, -1=Worse, 0=Same, 1=Better, 2=Much Better
Socioeconomic	5 Point Scale	-2 = Much Worse, -1=Worse, 0=Same, 1=Better, 2=Much Better
Education	7 Point Scale	0=Some High School, 1=High School Grad, 2=Some College, 3= College Grad, 4=Some Post-Grad, 5=MA, 6=JD, PhD, MD, Prof. Degree
Income	9 Point Scale	0=Less than \$20,000, 1=20-29,999, 2=30-39,999, 3=40-49,999, 4=50-59,999, 5=60-74,999, 6=75-99,999, 7 =100-149,999, 8=150,000 or more
Age	6 Point Scale	0=18-24, 1=25-29, 2=30-39, 3=40-49, 4=50-64, 5=65 and over
Unsure of Vote	Dummy	1=Respondent initially answered “Don’t Know” when asked to choose a candidate based solely on Project Vote Smart issue questions. 0= Respondent chose either Candidate 1 or Candidate 2.
Strong Preference	Dummy	1= Respondent indicated they felt strongly about their vote for president, 0= Respondent did not feel Strongly about their vote
Political Knowledge	9 Point Scale	Ranges from 0= Respondent answered all of the political knowledge questions wrong, to 8 = Respondent answered all the questions correctly. Built from 8 standard ANES political knowledge questions [(1) Maj. Party in Senate, (2) Maj. Party in House, (3) Which party more conservative, (4) Currently Unemployment Rate, (5) ID-Boehner, (6) ID-Biden, (7) ID-Roberts, (8) ID- Cameron]
Complex Context	4 Point Scale	Additive index indicating whether or not the state had (1) a gubernatorial election, (2) an election for U.S. Senate, (3) was considered a presidential battleground state. This ranges from 0 meaning the state was none of these things to 3 meaning the state had all of these going on.
Strength of PID	4 Point Scale	Standard 7 point partisanship scale folded so that 0= an independent, 1= leaning partisan, 2=partisan, 3= strong partisan.