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Abstract

Highton and Wolfinger report on the Pilot Study items which ask respondents to estimate the proportion of Blacks, Jews, and Hispanics in America. They find that the average respondent overestimates the aggregate population of these three groups by a factor of three. Highton and Wolfinger also find that respondents who are better educated and possess higher levels of political information give more accurate estimates of the size of minority populations. The authors then examine whether estimates of the size of the black population are related to respondents' positions on policies affecting minority groups. The only theoretically explicit finding of their study in this area is that, among people who rate blacks low on the feeling thermometer, high estimates of the black population are associated with greater support for increasing spending to fight drugs. Highton and Wolfinger speculate that the limited power of the Pilot Study racial proportion estimate questions may be caused by a propensity towards "nonattitudes" on the part of many respondents. Specifically, responses to the Pilot Study experimental items may be an amalgamation of stable responses -- from those who worry about a "rising tide of nonwhites" -- and unstable responses -- from those whose answers are based on nothing but a reluctance to admit ignorance.