

Are We Color-Blind Yet? An Investigation of Racism in  
American Academia

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## **Abstract**

Researchers have long debated over the existence of racism and the extent to which it is prevalent in America. This debate continues today, with conclusions as diverse as the fields in which the research is conducted. The purpose of this analysis is to examine racial attitudes in American universities as they apply to the perception of intelligence. To accomplish this, I conduct a survey with 159 respondents each of whom read a brief writing sample and then estimate the author's GPA on the basis of the writing sample. All surveys were identical except that some respondents received a survey with a picture of a Caucasian man as the author and some received a survey with a picture of the same man, edited so as to appear to be African American. Additionally, prior to the surveys being issued I successfully verified by doing a pretest that over 50% of the respondents were in agreement that the African American was indeed African American and the Caucasian was indeed Caucasian.

The results of this research yield no significant measure of racism, regardless of which mathematical instrument or subsection of the data I use. Although these results are in stark contrast to conventional wisdom, I provide theories as to why I was unable to find evidence of racism and provide suggestions for future research which will allow a more comprehensive study to be conducted. One variable, a dummy for the version of the survey the respondent sees (white or black), returned only marginally insignificant results – it is significant at the 10% level. Even so, this variable's coefficient provides evidence for an overcompensation effect – if accepted as significant, it would only show that respondents believed the African American man was more intelligent (when compared to the respondents themselves) than the Caucasian man.

## **1. Introduction**

In this analysis, I provide empirical evidence against the existence of racism among college students. To accomplish this, I surveyed 159 undergraduate and graduate students from both public and private universities near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I gave the respondents directions to estimate the grade point average (GPA) of the author of a short writing sample. All of the writing samples were the same; however some respondents received the writing sample accompanied by a photo of a Caucasian man, and some received the same writing sample accompanied by a photo of the same man, edited to look African American. After the respondent wrote down their estimated GPA, the survey instructed them to turn to the final page and fill out a brief demographic questionnaire asking questions such as gender, GPA, race and political affiliation of the respondent.

The purpose of this analysis is to examine the extent to which racism still exists and identify in which demographics it is more prevalent. This survey allows us to examine implicitly revealed racism among the university students surveyed, a more accurate measure of racism than any explicit survey could provide. By comparing the respondent's reported GPA with an estimate of the pictured author's GPA, we can determine a comparison which answers the question: "Does the respondent believe the author of the writing sample has a higher GPA than the respondent or a lower GPA than the respondent?" I use GPA as a general proxy for intelligence; thus the survey asks the question: "Does the respondent think they are more or less intelligent than the pictured author?"

Implicit, or symbolic racism, has been a term used to describe Americans' attitudes towards racism since just after the Civil Rights movement of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. This term was explained in depth by Rosenthal (1980) and generally indicates a form of racism that is expressed in "non-racial" terms. Some researchers believe that the United States has moved away from overt racism (Described by Arrow (1998), below) and towards this new form of implicit racism, as Virtanen and Huddy (1998) contend. The purpose of this analysis is to examine the extent to which symbolic or implicit racism still exists, as I believe that very few college students would express any overt racism when completing a survey in class.

## **2. Literature Review**

Despite expensive government programs, many feel that all forms of discrimination are still prevalent in the United States. One such opinion is that there are two forms of racism today: old-fashioned and newer, corresponding with old-fashioned and newer racists. The newer forms of racism examined by Virtanen and Huddy (1998) are less extreme, driven more by social stereotypes and affecting social welfare, whereas the old forms of racism reject even efforts to help the individual. For example, Virtanen and Huddy site new racism in the form of white opposition to affirmative action on the basis of all blacks, whereas old racism would want to limit any programs designed to help the poor to only whites. This newer form of racism, widely believed to be either the development or replacement of old-fashioned racism involves prejudice on a general level, often surfacing as resentment of government treatment towards minorities. A concern for researchers over this new form of racism is that the newer form could simply

represent a new framing for the same kind of prejudicial views, and not be an indication of more tolerant racial attitudes. In other words, while individual hate crimes may decrease, opposition by whites to programs like affirmative action may be indicative of simply a shift in the form of racism observed, not a decrease.

In their study of the 1990 General Social Survey, Virtanen and Huddy (1998) find that while only 10% of white respondents fall on the upper third of their old-fashioned prejudice scale, only 22% of respondents displayed no old-fashioned racism. This led the researchers to conclude that old-fashioned racism still plays an important political role, and that the new form of racism is radically different from the old form and that it is not simply a transformation. This is contrary to Virtanen and Huddy's initial hypothesis that the new form of racism may be only a transformation. The authors were confident that the research proved today's racism, while still existent, is less prevalent than it was in the past. Finally, the authors claim that resentment is not necessarily prejudice. Lower-class white resentment towards lower-class blacks could indicate a competitive jealousy, a perception that blacks do not work as hard as whites could be changed by education, and such a perception does not categorically indicate racism.

A contrasting view, provided by Kinder and Mendelberg (1995), holds that despite legal and social change aimed at eliminating Jim Crow, he is alive and well in communities across America. For example, "roughly 80% of black residents would have to resettle in other neighborhoods in order for racial balance to be achieved." To this end, the authors borrow the term "apartheid" to describe the current racial landscape of the United States. Kinder and Mendelberg (1995) believe that isolation diminishes prejudice

“insofar as racial proximity breeds the perception of racial threat, proximity will increase the potency of prejudice.”

After analyzing national survey concerning prejudice, the researches find that racial isolation increases the importance of prejudice to white public opinion. These results are in direct opposition to the authors’ cognitive theory that segregation is comfortable and would lead to an overall decrease in societal concern over racism in America. One explanation is that proximity should not be confused with threat. Racial proximity also offers whites and blacks the opportunity to interact in normal ways and may provide an avenue for a reduction of racial tension (as is the case in University life). Conversely, segregation leaves whites and blacks to rely only on (often negative) stereotypes about each other propagated by their respective cultures.

Lewis, et al. (2000) conducted a small survey of American undergraduate college students in an effort to measure their attitudes towards contemporary race relations. The authors find that some racism still exists in the form of opposition to affirmative action, however they also recognize that college is often the first opportunity students from otherwise segregated backgrounds have to interact with both students and faculty of an unfamiliar racial composition. This newfound exposure to diversity could have two effects: First, it could lead to a magnification of latent stereotypical behaviors towards peers of different races; second, having finally been exposed to a diverse, bohemian, exciting place, students may become more tolerant, breaking away from any traditional racism held by their communities, as was suggested by Kinder and Mendelberg. (1998)

It is clear that political scientists have ample and diverse opinions and research on the subject of race relations, but economists are equally opinionated. Loury (1998)

attempts to understand discrimination as an institution in modern American society. He recognizes traditional, demand-side, views on discrimination, including the idea that employers have a discrimination-quotient when analyzing employees. This theory contends that employers automatically discount the value of an employee based on their race. For example, if two employees with equal qualifications were given an expected value of 1 by the employer, the employer may give a black applicant a multiplier of 0.8 while he would give a white applicant a multiplier of 1.2. This would mean the white applicant would be hired over the black applicant even though the prospective employees are equally qualified.

This kind of discrimination is not necessarily a symptom of racism. It is possible that businesses are making profit maximizing decisions based on local tastes and preferences, as suggested by Blinder (1973). If local customers demand businesses to have only employees of a certain race, business owners would be forced to adopt prejudicial business practices to accommodate those local demands. Similar to the decision faced by the diner owner who doesn't allow blacks at his counter, not because he doesn't want to, but because he fears the consequences if he does, individuals may feel pressure to express racial attitudes lest they themselves become targets of criticism.

Loury (1998) also suggests supply-side considerations. He believes that a skill gap between blacks and whites could be used as an explanation for the different treatment of the two groups in the workplace. Citing geographical segregation, poor education, and a culture that suppresses success, Loury provides compelling evidence that the "wage gap" is both demand (employer) and supply (employee) driven. This conclusion is relevant because, unlike the opinions which seem to provide one side of the equation, (as

was the case in Kinder and Mendelberg (1995) and Virtanen and Huddy (1998), by focusing on whites as the only possible cause of racism, Loury shows that the perceived unfair treatment of blacks can be explained both by actual unfair treatment and a skills gap. Accordingly, it is the task of the researcher to filter out any possible, measurable, skills gaps and isolate the discrimination. Blinder (1973) actually provided such an analysis as Loury suggests years earlier. By using regression analysis, he finds that 70 percent of observed differences in wages between whites and blacks can be explained by actual discrimination and not a gap in skills. Furthermore, he finds that 100 percent of the wage differences between males and females can be explained by discrimination.

Arrow (1998) offers a perspective of economics and discrimination. Arrow starts with the simple but important observation that prior to legal measures, overt racism was prevalent and there was no need for clever research. Help wanted signs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century clearly stated racial preferences and it was well known that good jobs simply were not available to blacks. In summary of this overt racism, Arrow quotes Samuel Johnson, overt racial discrimination is a fact “too evident for detection and too gross for aggravation.” The impact of this overt racism is critical to any theory or model of prejudice. Cultural norms, even when imposed by the rule of law, change slowly and there is bound to be some residual racism in any society with such a mired racial past.

Arrow is also concerned with the hypothesis that there is a hidden racial agenda by economic agents. If economic agents choose not to buy from or sell to certain races, it belies the theory that they are profit maximizers; and “although this does not contradict rational choice theory, it undermines it by introducing an additional variable.” Citing this and other complexities posed by discrimination to classic economic theory, Arrow seems



to concede that market explanations may fall short in completely explaining racism, and that due to the interpersonal nature of most economic transactions, sociology may provide more focused answers.

An examination that does add sociological theory to the analysis is that conducted by Colbeau, et al. (1990) The group conducted an experiment of political candidates at two Wisconsin technical schools. This experiment attempted to find out if people judged political candidates differently by changing the candidate's race, *ceteris paribus*. They used a biographical page as the first page of the questionnaire, which included a photo of the fabricated candidate. Some of the respondents received biographies with a white photograph and some of the respondents received ones with a black photograph. The results were striking.

The group found that the "Black Sullivan" (The fictional name, Ben Sullivan, given to their candidate) actually received higher scores from the college-aged respondents than the "White Sullivan." The most compelling explanation offered by the authors for this result is that "respondents bent over backwards to be fair to the 'Black Sullivan'," a theory of overcompensation. Another theory is that the respondents were "rewarding [Sullivan] for succeeding over such daunting [the cultural struggles framed by blacks in the 20<sup>th</sup> century] odds." Although these results are fascinating, the authors submit that there exists under representation in elected government of minority candidates. The authors attribute this to other factors such as partisanship, the "old-fashioned" racism discussed by Virtanen (1998), or group conflict. In other words, the researchers believe that college students are more open-minded and generally tolerant than the voting population at large.

### **3. Methodology**

To be certain that college students would view the pictured individual as being of the race intended (African American and Caucasian for the two versions), I conducted a pretest survey with 59 respondents. Thirty-nine of the respondents saw the photo of the African American and were asked to identify his race. Twenty of the respondents saw the photo of the Caucasian man and were asked to identify his race. The results of the pretest are provided below. The pretest was a necessary step in the process; I had to be sure that respondents would view the photos as I intended, otherwise the surveys were a irrelevant in capturing racial attitudes. As is evident below, the respondents did view the photos as they were intended, so I was able to continue my research with the current photos.

The main survey was conducted in undergraduate and graduate level business courses at one public university and one private university near Pittsburgh, PA. In total, 159 surveys were administered and completed by respondents. All of the surveys were identical except that 70 of the respondents received a survey with an accompanying photo of a Caucasian man and 89 respondents received an accompanying photo of the same man, edited to appear African American. One-hundred seven of the respondents were from the public university and 52 of the respondents were from the private university. I decided that, in an effort to avoid spurious results, any class being surveyed would only receive either the “white version” (wherein the pictured author is Caucasian) or the “black version” (wherein the pictured author is African American) for both the survey itself, and the pretest discussed above.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the pretest survey instruments are included in the appendix, Exhibits 1 and 2.

#### 4. Results

The construction and results of the pretest are below:

$$\begin{array}{ll}
 H_{o1}: p_1 > .50 & H_{o2}: p_2 > .50 \\
 H_{a1}: p_1 < .50 & H_{a2}: p_2 < .50
 \end{array}$$

Where  $p_1$  (Proportion 1) is the percentage of respondents who received the black version of the pretest and believe the pictured individual is African American and  $p_2$  (Proportion 2) is the percentage of respondents who received the white version of the pretest and believe the pictured individual is Caucasian.

	<b>Value</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>T-Statistic</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
$p_1$	0.769	39	0.011	24.891	Fail to reject
$p_2$	0.850	20	0.018	19.604	Fail to reject

I also ran two additional tests per proportion to be sure that males and females did not perceive the pictured author differently. The results are below:

$p_1$	<b>Value</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>T-Statistic</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
Males	0.722	18	0.025	8.931	Fail to reject
Females	0.809	21	0.019	16.553	Fail to reject

$p_2$	<b>Value</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>T-Statistic</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
Males	0.923	13	0.021	20.640	Fail to reject
Females	0.714	7	0.064	3.320	Fail to reject

I then ran Difference of Means tests on various subsets of the dataset, answering questions such as:

1. Do men rate the white survey differently than the black survey?
2. Do democrats rate the white survey differently than the black survey?
3. Do all respondents rate the white survey differently than the black survey?

The results of the confidence interval tests I conducted are included in Table 1. The variable I used for comparison was the ratio between the respondent's GPA and the estimated GPA of the writing sample's author:

$$GPARatio = \frac{\text{Estimated GPA}}{\text{Respondent's GPA}}$$

Since I used GPA as a proxy for intelligence in this experiment, this value tells us if the respondent believed the picture author, based on the writing sample given, was more intelligent (GPA Ratio > 1) or less intelligent (GPA Ratio < 1) than the respondent.

In the table below, the domain indicates which respondents were being measured. “Entire Sample” and “White Males” are both straightforward, but in the case of “Females and Males” I am indicating that the first mean given on the right is from sampled Females who saw the “survey used” indicated to the right. So for “Domain = Females and Males” and “Survey Used = Black” this means that the first mean is females who viewed the black survey and the second mean is males who viewed the black survey. Conversely, in the case of “Domain = Whites” and “Survey Used = White and Black” means the first mean listed is whites who saw the white survey and the second mean is whites who saw the black survey.

Table 1: Difference of Means tests

Domain	Survey Used	Actual Means	95% Confident Interval
Entire Sample	White and Black	0.91 vs. 0.98	-0.14 to 0.00
Whites	White and Black	0.91 vs. 0.98	-0.16 to 0.01
White Males	White and Black	0.91 vs. 0.97	-0.17 to 0.05
Republicans	White and Black	0.90 vs. 0.96	-0.19 to 0.07
Democrats	Black	0.92 vs. 1.00	-0.18 to 0.03
Women	Black	0.90 vs. 1.01	-0.23 to 0.00
Respondents with a GPA +3.0	White and Black	0.94 vs. 0.98	-0.02 to 0.10
Respondents with a GPA -3.0	White and Black	0.98 vs. 1.03	-0.19 to 0.02
Non-Whites and Whites	Black	0.98 vs. 0.97	-0.11 to 0.13
Non-Whites and Whites	Black	0.91 vs. 0.91	-0.09 to 0.09
Females and Males	Black	0.96 vs. 1.01	-0.16 to 0.06
Females and Males	White	0.91 vs. 0.89	-0.08 to 0.10
Republicans and Democrats	Black	1.00 vs. 0.96	-0.19 to 0.07

I then regressed *GPARatio* on a series of dummy variables, definition and results below.

“0 otherwise” was omitted from variables  $B_1 - B_9$  for formatting. (SE) refers to Standard Error.

Variable	Name	Definition	Coefficient (SE)	P-Value
$\alpha$	CONSTANT	Constant Term	1.01 (0.092)	0.000
$\beta_1$	MALE	1 if respondent is male, 0 otherwise	-0.039 (0.041)	0.346
$\beta_2$	WHITE	1 if respondent is white	-0.091 (0.053)	0.958
$\beta_3$	AFRICAN	1 if respondent is African American	0.015 (0.106)	0.883
$\beta_4$	ASIAN	1 if respondent is Asian	-0.113 (0.121)	0.352
$\beta_5$	DEMOCRAT	1 if respondent is a Democrat	0.011 (0.052)	0.839
$\beta_6$	REPUBLICAN	1 if respondent is a Republican	-0.002 (0.556)	0.967
$\beta_7$	LIBERTARIAN	1 if respondent is Libertarian	-0.073 (0.130)	0.575
$\beta_8$	GREEN	1 if respondent is Green Party	-0.223 (0.245)	0.365
$\beta_9$	WHITESURVEY	1 if respondent saw the white picture	-0.078 (0.040)	0.052

## 5. Conclusions

My decision to perform this experiment began with the basic assumption that racism still existed, a belief shared by nearly all of the authors in the above literature review, including Arrow (1998), Virtanen and Huddy (1998), and Loury (1998). I was curious to what extent and in what form the racism manifested itself. The widely held belief in America is that racism is still a major issue. For example, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People writes on their website: “Today we face a renewed effort as the forces of racism and retrogression in America are again on the rise. Many of the hard-earned civil rights gains of the past three decades are under assault.” If this is the case, I wanted to pinpoint the specific demographic groups in which racism still existed and offer any suggestions I could, based on those conclusions, to help solve the problem.

What I found, however, was no evidence of racism regardless of how I divided the data. The seminal ideological force which drives racists is the notion that both they (personally) and their race (generally) are superior to both another individual (personally) and another race (generally). To capture this racism, I compared the self-reported GPA’s of respondents to their estimate of the GPA of the pictured author. This is a more precise measure of how the respondents compared the pictured individual to themselves, rather than simply a general notion of superiority.

The first logical choice was to compare how the entire sample rated the black version of the survey to themselves and how the entire sample rated the white version to themselves. After making this comparison, which included 159 respondents, my confident intervals were insignificant at the 5% level. The higher limit, however, was

very close to zero, (and the p-value significant at the 10% level) so an argument that could be made would be that increasing the sample size, given similar results, might provide a confident interval that did not include zero.. Even if this were the case, and the results in a larger sample included a confidence interval of entirely negative values, it would be conclusive against the existence of racism and for an overcompensation effect as observed by Colleau, et al. (1990). I agree with Colleau, et al. that if this is the case, the respondents are likely “bending over backwards” to be fair to the black version of the survey, or rewarding the black man for overcoming the socioeconomic factors that often are attributed to the oppression of minorities.

For every group of individuals that I compared, I found compelling results against the existence of racism. I tried comparing how whites judged the white survey verses how non-whites judged the same survey, and was met with the same conclusion: I could find no evidence of racism. Another idea was to compare how whites estimated the black version verses how blacks estimated the same version, and again, I found no evidence of racism. Male, female, white, black, republican, democrat: it simply didn't matter which groups I used for my difference of means test, there was no evidence of racism.

After being surprised by these unexpected results, I turned to a more advanced mathematical technique which would capture the relationship between my respondents and their estimates in a more sophisticated way, regression analysis. The regression of GPA ratio on the series of dummy variables described in the section above was consistent with the results of the difference of means tests. The only variable approaching significance was WHITESURVEY, which was equal to 1 if the respondent was seeing the white version of the survey, and 0 otherwise. This only marginally insignificant

variable, again, would only prove the overcompensation effect mentioned above and observed by Colleau, et al. (1990) were it accepted to be significant. Based on the path these results have led me down, I accept, against my original hypothesis, that I found no evidence of racism.

It is important to remember that the purview of my investigation included only college students, and not the population at large. It is reasonable to expect educated individuals to be more tolerant and less susceptible to racial hatred and propaganda they may be exposed to. Furthermore, higher education institutions have made efforts to combat racism with the creation of black student unions, awareness days, and courses designed to encourage tolerance and an appreciation for diverse cultural views, because of this respondents may have been overcompensating towards the African American as suggested above.

There are two argument subsequent to this conclusion. First, it could be argued that these kinds of programs are no longer necessary, and spending should be used in other ways such as improving technology, lowering class size, or improving housing on campuses. Conversely, it could also be argued that this “diversity spending” is actively preventing racism on campus and that if the spending is removed, the racism will resurface. My opinion is that the “diversity spending” is a treatment, not a vaccine. What we are doing is working, and discontinuing it might be like removing a tourniquet; the patient could begin bleeding again.



## **6. Suggestions for Future Research**

An interesting variation in this experiment would be to conduct it on a wider level, in a societal setting such as a grocery store. The researcher would have to find a proxy for intelligence that was relevant to the society at large. A more specific purview might be to compare results from college students to results from high school graduates of similar age to see if there is a correlation between education or intelligence and racism.

Additionally, this experiment could be modified into a verbal form. A professional actor could be hired and makeup could be applied to change the actor's skin tone. The actor would then give a short lecture to an audience, and the audience would be asked to rate the actor's performance (not knowing he was an actor, but rather thinking that he was an expert in his field). If this was conducted enough times, and the actor made a special effort to be as consistent throughout the performances as possible, it would certainly yield important, information-rich results.

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## **Appendix**

Attached:

Exhibits 1 and 2, the two versions of the pretest.

Exhibits 3 and 4, the two versions of the survey.

Thank you for participating in this survey. There are no “tricks” in this survey; the purpose is only to determine your perception of the photo of this American individual. Please look at the image and answer the multiple-choice questions that follow:



Please identify the gender of this American person (circle one).

Female

Male

Please identify the race of this American person (circle one).

European-American

African-American

Asian-American

Latino-American

Other

Please identify YOUR gender (circle one).

Female

Male

Please turn your paper over when you have finished the survey. Thank you very much!

Thank you for participating in this survey. There are no “tricks” in this survey; the purpose is only to determine your perception of the photo of this American individual. Please look at the image and answer the multiple-choice questions that follow:



Please identify the gender of this American person (circle one).

Female

Male

Please identify the race of this American person (circle one).

European-American

African-American

Asian-American

Latino-American

Other

Please identify YOUR gender (circle one).

Female

Male

Please turn your paper over when you have finished the survey. Thank you very much!

**DO NOT TURN THE PAGE UNTIL YOU ARE TOLD TO DO SO.**

**The purpose of this survey is to examine the extent to which a person's intelligence is reflected in his/her writing style.**

**Please do not talk during the survey.**

**On the next page you will see a writing sample from the pictured author. Based on the writing sample alone, you will be asked to estimate the author's GPA.**

**DO NOT TURN THE PAGE UNTIL YOU ARE TOLD TO DO SO.**



My undergraduate education consisted of economics and marketing in a business school. The main subjects covered were microeconomics and sports marketing. I believe this background will provide me a good starting point for my graduate studies in sports economics. I look forward to working with the faculty at my new University to continue my education.

Based on this writing sample, what is your estimate of the author's GPA (write a number between 0.0 and 4.0)?

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When you are finished, turn the page and continue.

Please identify your gender (circle one).

Female

Male

Please give your GPA. Remember, this survey is completely anonymous. (circle one).

0.0 – 1.5

1.51 – 2.0

2.01 – 2.5

2.51 – 3.0

3.01 – 3.5

3.51 – 4.0

Please identify your race (circle one).

White

African-American

Asian-American

Latino-American

Other

Rather Not Say

Please identify your political affiliation (circle one).

Democrat

Republican

Libertarian

Green/Reform

Other

No affiliation

When you are finished, turn the packet over and wait quietly.



**DO NOT TURN THE PAGE UNTIL YOU ARE TOLD TO DO SO.**

**The purpose of this survey is to examine the extent to which a person's intelligence is reflected in his/her writing style.**

**Please do not talk during the survey.**

**On the next page you will see a writing sample from the pictured author. Based on the writing sample alone, you will be asked to estimate the author's GPA.**

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---

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Female

Male

Please give your GPA. Remember, this survey is completely anonymous. (circle one).

0.0 – 1.5

1.51 – 2.0

2.01 – 2.5

2.51 – 3.0

3.01 – 3.5

3.51 – 4.0

Please identify your race (circle one).

White

African-American

Asian-American

Latino-American

Other

Rather Not Say

Please identify your political affiliation (circle one).

Democrat

Republican

Libertarian

Green/Reform

Other

No affiliation

When you are finished, turn the packet over and wait quietly.