

Author(s): Berinsky, Adam J. and Howard Lavine

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Abstract:

In a climate governed by tolerant beliefs, analysts of public opinion confront a series of troubling questions about the accuracy with which attitudes and beliefs in sensitive domains (e.g., race, sexuality) are measured. Considering the domain of race, overt prejudice has declined to the point where it barely registers in national studies, measures of “new racism” are challenged as valid indicators of prejudice, and racial stereotypes suffer from social desirability concerns. Previous strategies to combat this problem have not satisfactorily measured the extent to which racial attitudes underlie attitudes toward racially-tinged policies. With reduced forms of the SM scale the authors offer a new approach to identification of individuals who are most and least susceptible to tolerant social norms which will better facilitate study of attitudes concerning a variety of socially sensitive political topics, such as attitudes towards homosexuals, the poor, and members of racial and ethnic minority groups. SM provides a thoroughly validated measure of individual differences in responsiveness to social norms, and promises to allow survey researchers to identify which individuals are motivated to “dissemble” in their responses to socially sensitive questions.