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Barking Up the Wrong Tree: Why Bo Won't Fetch Many Votes for Barack Obama in 2012

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Abstract:

In "The Dog that Didn't Bark: The Role of Canines in the 2008 Campaign," Diana Mutz (2010) argues that dog ownership made voters significantly less likely to vote for Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election. We examine this claim further. While President Obama has owned a dog since shortly after his 2008 election, we argue that Bo's presence will not do much to improve his owner's chances of being reelected in 2012. Rather, the apparent significance of dog ownership is due largely to key variables being omitted from the analysis. Using the same data, we show that Obama didn't so much have trouble with dog owners as he had trouble with conservative, rural, Southern whites, who, for reasons we examine, are more likely than other Americans to own dogs. While we recognize the tongue-in-jowl tone of portions of Mutz's article, this tale is an important one, and is consistent with recent research linking racial attitudes to levels of support for Barack Obama. We also argue that while scholars are often wise to include control variables such as "South" in studies of political attitudes and behavior, it is important to consider the variety of politically-relevant characteristics that such variables may be capturing.

We wish to thank Seneca Jacobsmeier and Nora Lewis, our feline and canine friends, respectively, for their companionship and support, which remain unflinching even though we usually leave them at home when attending conferences. They also refuse to talk about politics, which is probably one of the main reasons that they manage to put up with us.

The 2008 presidential election campaign that resulted in the election of Barack Obama was unusual in many ways. For the first-time, a black candidate won the nomination of a major political party, and he did so by surpassing early favorite Hillary Clinton – who would have been the first female to win a major party nomination – to earn a spot on the Democratic ticket. For the first time, a woman won a spot on the Republican ticket, with John McCain choosing Sarah Palin as his running mate. Once Obama secured the Democratic nomination, the general election looked to be walk in the park. An incumbent president facing unprecedented levels of disapproval, two unpopular wars, and a severe economic crisis all came together to aid Obama in the general election. Yet when the votes were tallied, Obama's victory fell short of the landslide that some had predicted (Lewis-Beck, et al., 2010). Why did the Obama campaign seem to underperform in the general election?

Some have suggested that factors such as racial attitudes (Lewis-Beck & Tien, 2009; Tesler & Sears, 2010; Pasek, et al., 2009) and religion (Hollander, 2009; Barreto, et al., 2009) had important roles to play in limiting Obama's victory margin. While race and religion may have been important, Diana Mutz (2010) has proposed a particularly elegant and compelling theory that could provide an explanation for lack of an Obama landslide. In a recent issue of *PS*, Mutz argues that Obama was penalized to a significant degree because he, quite literally, did not have a dog in the race. The fact that the Obama family did not own a dog during the campaign seems to have depressed his level of support. To make matters worse, Obama unintentionally emphasized this deficiency by publically vowing to fulfill his daughters' wishes for a dog after the campaign had run its course.[1]

[1] It is of course likely that Sarah Palin, the Republican nominee for vice president, also brought the issue to the fore by characterizing herself as a pitbull with lipstick.

While some might scoff at Mutz's thesis, her findings regarding Obama's failure to win the vote of the canine constituency hold up even when a doggone extensive list of factors known to affect voting decisions are controlled for. Even when partisanship, ideology, perceptions of the economy, and socioeconomic factors are accounted for, dog ownership remains a statistically and substantively significant predictor of both evaluations of Obama and vote choice. While we take Mutz's article to be, at least to a substantial extent, tongue in jowl[2] – and a real howler at that – a strong case can be made that Team Obama ought to consider throwing dog-owners a bone in 2012. After all, for a president, years in office are a lot like dog years, and a great deal can happen in a single four-year term; Obama's relatively easy victory in 2008 must seem like ancient history to his campaign staff. His honeymoon period long over, President Obama will likely have to defend his leadership in light of an economy that is still struggling, and there is little doubt that the bark of conservative Americans will increase in volume as the election draws nearer. If Mutz's conclusions are on the mark, a successful appeal to the canine constituency in 2012 will leave Obama much less likely to be banished to the electoral doghouse.

As the as the general election campaign heats up during the dog days of summer, might it be prudent for President Obama and his advisors to aggressively pursue the votes of dog-lovers? There is some anecdotal evidence that Team Obama has already undertaken this process. President Obama recently took Bo on a Christmas shopping trip that received significant media attention, and Bo was also prominently featured on the Obama's holiday cards and Easter Egg Roll invitation (see Figure 1). Given what we now seem to know about canines and campaigns, though, should Obama's campaign staff also chastise him if he fails to take Boout to the Rose Garden with sufficient frequency? If, on the campaign trail, Obama stops to eat tamales in Texas

[2] An epigraph to Mutz's article reads: "This study is in memory of Lee Sigelman, who always made me laugh." While we did not have the honor of knowing Lee Sigelman, his work has greatly influenced our own scholarly pursuits, a fact for which we are both very much grateful.

(preferably with the cornhusks removed[3]), should he be sure to ask for a doggy bag while the cameras are rolling? When discussing the time he spent in Chicago, might the president be well-advised to sneak in a reference to the city's famous hot dogs? Should Team Obama develop a foreign policy plank that highlights America's ties with Portugal, home of Bo's ancestors? Or perhaps, although Portuguese Water Dogs have, historically, been working dogs and friends of fishermen, the Obama family should supplement Bo's presence by acquiring a second dog of a variety more familiar to rural Americans, lest the criticism of "that dog don't hunt!" be levied in key battleground states.[4]

As Mutz notes, "Democrats should be wagging their tails over the arrival of Bo Obama, who could play well to potential swing voters in 2012." Obama now has a dog to call his own, and hence, *ceteris peribus*, support for Obama should increase relative to 2008. But will this actually turn out to be the case? We think not. We argue that Bo is not likely to fetch many votes for his owner. Indeed, we show that the apparent significance of dog ownership is due largely to key variables being omitted from Mutz's analysis. While we find much to admire in Mutz's analysis, she is probably barking up the wrong tree when it comes to attributing the "dog gap" to dog ownership in itself. After sniffing around, we think we are on the trail of the root causes of the dog gap, and they have little to do with Bo, Spot, Spuds, Fido, or Lassie. If Obama's election strategists are counting on a bit of Bo-mentum to increase the president's chances of re-election, we suspect they will be disappointed. Bo may bark, but the opposition shouldn't worry too much about being bitten.

[3] This lesson was learned by Gerald Ford while campaigning in 1976.
[4] A good choice might be a bulldog, as Georgia was a swing state in 2008, and its residents, many of whom are college football fans, are already primed to revere bulldogs due to the Georgia Bulldogs winning the eastern division of the SEC in 2011.

In reanalyzing the data used by Mutz, we show that Obama didn't so much have trouble with dog owners as he had trouble with conservative, Southern whites, who, for reasons we will discuss, are more likely than other Americans to own dogs. While some may feel that exploring links between pet ownership and political attitudes and behavior is for the birds, the tale[5] is an important one, and is consistent with recent research linking racial attitudes to levels of support for Barack Obama (Lewis-Beck & Tien, 2009; Tesler & Sears, 2010; Pasek, et al., 2009). We also argue that while scholars are often wise to include control variables such as "South" in studies of political attitudes and behavior, it is important to consider the variety of politically-relevant characteristics that such variables may be capturing.

The Dog Gap: Theory and Evidence

Mutz proposes two potential explanations for the dog gap: a group identification theory and a congruency-oriented theory. According to the group-identification theory, dog-owners should identify with, and hence feel an affinity for, other dog owners. The congruency-based theory, on the other hand, suggests that if members of the electorate appreciate the characteristics of a certain type of pet, such as loyalty or tenacity, those citizens will reward candidates who share those qualities. Mutz finds that, even when a myriad of relevant factors affecting public opinion are controlled for, dog-owners were less supportive of Barack Obama than respondents who did not own dogs. This can be been seen in Table 1, where Mutz's results regarding the effects of dog ownership, both on respondents' support for Obama relative to their support for McCain, and on respondents' voting decisions, are presented in Columns 1 and 3. The coefficients on the dog ownership indicator variables are negative and statistically significant,

[5] We wish to note that "A Dog's Tale" is a famous short story authored by Mark Twain, who, as Mutz notes, had much to say about canines. Incidentally, we assume that many readers will find our work much less clever than Mr. Twain's, and for that, we apologize.

and the magnitudes of the effects are substantial. Moreover, owners of pets other than dogs did not reward (or punish) Obama as compared to pet-less survey respondents, a finding which leads Mutz to conclude that the evidence points in the direction of the group identification theory. Furthermore, Mutz shows that the effect of dog ownership extends beyond thermometer-style approval scores to presidential voting decisions. Our replications of Mutz's results are shown in Columns 2 and 4 of Table 1.[6]

As is the case with many young theories, the content of the group identification theory is rather thin. For example, although the owner of a dog of the same *breed* as a candidate might be expected to display a particularly strong affinity for that candidate, purebreds play the same role in Mutz's theory as mutts. We do not wish to criticize Mutz on this front, as we feel that imaginative and creative scholars should not be kept on too tight a leash when hunting for explanations in previously uncharted territory. We do feel, however, that as Mutz's theory is such a parsimonious one, empirical tests of the implications of that theory may be particularly vulnerable to omitted variable bias.

It should be stressed that the object of our analysis is not simply to explain away the importance of dog ownership in determining levels of support for candidates, but rather to better to understand the variables that are indeed critical to support for Barack Obama, and evaluate how those factors will play out in 2012. We first address regional differences in the effects of dog ownership. We then more fully incorporate racial attitudes into the analysis. Subsequently, we discuss the issues of urban-rural divisions and differences between hunters and non-hunters,

[6] While our estimated coefficients are not exactly the same as Mutz's, with few exceptions, the signs and statistical significance of the coefficients are identical, and the magnitudes of the effects are quite similar. We use this replication as the launching point for our reanalysis, which seeks to account for a number of crucial variables that are not accounted for in Mutz's model.

which are related to both dog ownership and cross-regional cultural differences that drive differences is support for Barack Obama.

Reexamining the Canine Constituency

Regional Differences in the Dog Gap

As originally stated, Mutz's models of the dog gap should be applicable to dog owners in a wide variety of circumstances. More specifically, given Mutz's theory, we see little reason to expect that the effect of dog ownership should vary systematically with the region of the country in which a respondents lives. While the list of variables included in the Mutz's models is quite comprehensive, the lack of a control for region is what originally started us chasing after alternative explanations for the dog gap. Like many scholars of political science, our graduate experiences included Pavlovian training in the detection of potential omitted variable bias. Moreover, as most of us undoubtedly know, every dog has its day, and in a similar way, almost every model of American public opinion or voting behavior has its South dummy variable. Could it be the case that Southerners are both more likely to have dogs, and, for reasons not directly related to dog ownership itself, less likely to support Obama?

Figure 2 shows the percentage of dog owners by census region, as estimated from the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) data that Mutz makes use of in her analysis,[7] along with Obama's mean advantage over John McCain in thermometer scores in each region. As can easily be discerned, rates of dog ownership vary with geographical location. Using census region as the geographical unit, dog ownership is most common in the South and least common

[7] We are grateful to Annenberg for making this data publically available. In conjunction with the questions on pet ownership that the survey includes, its large sample size makes it particularly useful for our purposes.

in the Northeast.[8] Additionally, regional variation in support for Barack Obama is obvious, with the level of support for Obama being strongest in the Northeast, where dog ownership is least common, and weakest in the South, where dog ownership is most common. Of course, if dog ownership really does drive distaste for Obama, this pattern should not be surprising. We believe, however, that characteristics of the South other than dog ownership, and beyond commonly cited influences on public opinion and behavior such as partisanship, depress support for Obama.

Before discussing these characteristics, we present a modified version of the first of Mutz's models that includes dummy variables representing census regions in the first column of Table 2. The Northeast is the omitted reference category. We also include a more precise measure of racial identification in this model; we feel this is particularly important given Obama's status as the first black major-party presidential candidate. The results show that region has a significant impact on Obama's favorability, with the coefficient on South being strongly negative and statistically significant, and the coefficients on Midwest and West being significant in the positive direction.[9] Even when controlling for partisanship and ideology, region matters. Moreover, as shown by the reduction in magnitude of the coefficient on dog ownership in this modified model, regional differences seem to explain a significant portion of the variance in rates of support for Obama that was previously attributed to the influence of dog ownership. The coefficient on the dog ownership indicator is reduced from -2.46 (in our original replication of Mutz's model) to -1.79.[10]

[8] All cross-regional differences except the Midwest-West difference are statistically significant.
[9] The differences between each region and each other region are all significant, as well.
[10] Much of the reduction in this coefficient is actually attributable to the inclusion of the improved measure of racial identification. If the regional dummies are added, but Mutz's original "nonwhite" variable is used, the coefficient on dog ownership is reduced from -.246 to -.228.

To further highlight this point, we present regression results that predict Obama's support levels in each census region individually in Columns 2 through 5 of Table 2. Here we can see that the effect of dog ownership varies across the different regions. Indeed, in the Northeast, a region in which Barack Obama did well in 2008, the effect of dog ownership on support for Obama is not statistically significant, and is much smaller in magnitude. The effect of dog ownership is strongest in the West, followed by the South, then the Northeast, and finally the Midwest, where the coefficient on the dog ownership indicator is small and far from being statistically significant. Why might this be the case?

What explains the significance of the South dummy, and of the regional dummies more generally? We believe at least two factors contribute to the importance of region. First, for a given self-placement on the liberal-conservative ideology scale, respondents from one census region tend to be more or less conservative in terms of policy preferences than respondents in other regions. The ideological self-placement question provides an imperfect measure of what we will refer to as operational ideology,[11] and including region in the analysis effectively allows for more accurate measurement of the operational ideologies of respondents. Second, the ideology variable based on self-placement fails to sufficiently tap the racial conservatism that is more pronounced in the South than in other regions.

We are certainly not the first scholars to note that the standard 7-point ideology scale is an imperfect measure of ideology, particularly if a researcher wishes to draw inferences related to the types of policy positions that citizens support. The use of an issue-based ideological scale can reduce measurement error (Ansolabehere, et al., 2008) and potentially reduce bias. The NAES data allows us to create such a scale. We included survey questions regarding respondents' opinions on whether government should do more, foreign policy approaches,

[11] Free and Cantril (1968) referred to typical Americans as ideologically conservative but operationally liberal.

immigration control, abortion, and gay marriage in a factor analysis to generate a measure of operational ideology, with more positive numbers representing more operationally conservative respondents. As expected, among those who place themselves at a given location on the ideology scale, respondents from the South are more conservative in terms of average operational ideology than respondents from the Northeast and the West for every category on the 7-point scale, and, in most cases, more operationally conservative than respondents from the Midwest, as well. For example, among white respondents classifying themselves as slightly conservative, the mean operational ideology score was 0.52 in the South, 0.40 in the Midwest, 0.32 in the West, and 0.28 the East.[12]

At this point, the reader may be wondering what the correlation between region and operational ideology has to do with dogs. The answer is straightforward: dog ownership is correlated not only with region, but also with operational ideology, and operational ideology is strongly correlated with support for Barack Obama. As such, leaving region of out of the regression equation causes omitted variable bias that overestimates the importance of dog ownership.

Race and the Dog Gap

Region is correlated not only with ideology (both self-identified and operational), but also with race. Moreover, in 2008, the presence of a black candidate on the Democratic presidential highlighted the possibility that attitudes related to racial identity would play a major role in deciding the election. While most scholars of American politics would likely agree that racial issues are an important part of the political landscape, the results of studies designed to determine whether white voters discriminate against black candidates in a direct way have been

[12] The differences in means are all statistically significant.

decidedly inconclusive, partially because of the correlations between racial attitudes and other politically important variables such as ideology (Hutchings & Valentino, 2004). Evidence of the persistence of racial prejudice of other sorts, however, is much more consistent and plentiful (see, for example, Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997 and Kuklinski, et al., 1997). What role, if any, did race play in the election of Barack Obama, and what does the answer to that question have to do with dogs?

A number of studies have already established that racial attitudes resulted in Barack Obama's margin of victory being smaller than it would have been in if race had not played a role. In examining aggregate data, Benjamin Highton (2011) shows that even when numerous controls are employed, the racial attitudes of white voters are strongly correlated with Obama's state-level vote shares. While individual-level data is often preferable to aggregate data, we wish to call attention to the regional differences that are clearly apparent in Highton's state-level measure of racial prejudice, which is based on respondents' levels of agreement with a statement that it is acceptable for blacks and whites to date. If this measure of prejudicial attitudes is correlated with state-level dog ownership rates, it would suggest that the dog ownership coefficient in Mutz's models might also be biased due to dog ownership unintentionally tapping regional differences in racial attitudes. Indeed, the correlation between dog ownership and Highton's state-level measure of prejudice is a strikingly strong 0.40, and statistically significant. Figure 3 plots state-level racial prejudice vs. the percentage of households in a state that own dogs. The concentration of Southern states in the upper-right portion of the graph is striking. The cluster of Mountain West states in the lower-right section is also of interest. Were it not for high levels of dog ownership in these states, which is likely due in large part to the large rural

areas in these states, the slope of the best-fit line would be steeper, and the relationship between racial attitudes and dog ownership would be even stronger.

Of course, Highton's measure of racial prejudice is not likely to perfectly capture racial attitudes. Is there any additional evidence that the dog ownership variables in the Mutz's models might be capturing something other than the importance of dog ownership? As it turns out, there is. If the theory put forth by Mutz is true, it would seem reasonable to expect that dog owners would not only punish candidates who do not own dogs, but would also reward candidates who do have canine companions. To see if this was the case in 2008, we decoupled the Obama and McCain favorability ratings and estimated models of approval for each candidate separately.[13] Did respondents reward John McCain for owning not just one, but fourteen dogs (Stregowski, 2008) during his candidacy?[14] The answer is no. When controlling for region and using our more precise measure of racial identification, the coefficient on dog ownership in the model McCain approval ratings is positive, but small in magnitude, and much smaller than its standard error. The usefulness of dog ownership in predicting Obama's advantage over McCain is due almost entirely to evaluations of Obama.

Perhaps, however, all else equal, dog owners penalize Democratic candidates for some reason other than the lack of a dog or regional differences in ideology and racial attitudes. We were also able to examine this possibility, as respondents in the NAES survey were asked who they voted for in the 2004 presidential election contest between then-president George W. Bush and John Kerry. As it turns out, the coefficient on dog ownership in a logit model predicting

[13] Numerical results not presented here are available from the authors. Additionally, as there may be more noise in the separate models of approval for McCain and Obama due to the lack of an "anchor point" for individual respondents, we ran models where the approval ratings were normalized per respondent based on the average approval rating that each respondent gave to the four candidates for the presidency and vice presidency. The results were very similar.

[14] According to the same source, McCain also owned six cats, two turtles, three birds, fourteen fish and a ferret.

votes for Kerry, a dog owner, is actually positive, as it was in the case of McCain, but very small in magnitude and not statistically significant. Dog owners didn't reward Kerry to any significant degree for owning Cym, a German Shepard, and they didn't punish him to any unusual degree for being a Democrat. While there are certainly many differences between the candidacies of John Kerry and Barack Obama, the race of the two candidates is a prominent one. Though the failure of dog ownership to predict votes for John Kerry is not direct evidence of our thesis that dog ownership is partially tapping racial attitudes in the Mutz's models, it is consistent with our argument.

Among scholars who have examined the racial aspect of the 2008 election at the individual-level, Lewis-Beck, et al. (2010) find that even when controlling for ideology and other relevant factors, those respondents who felt that Obama would favor blacks if elected president were not only less likely to vote for him, but also less likely to convert dissatisfaction with the poor economy into electoral support for Obama.[15] In a similar fashion, we are also able to incorporate an individual-level measure of racial attitudes into our analysis and see how it affects both approval of Obama and the coefficients on variables such as dog ownership, racial identification, and region. Respondents were asked to rate the characteristics of racial groups (including their own) on a scale from 0 to 100. We created a racial attitudes measure using a principle components analysis of the differences between whites' ratings of their own racial group and their ratings of blacks. The characteristics included whether these racial groups were hardworking, intelligent and trustworthy. The results of our models that include these individual-level measures of operational ideology and racial attitudes can be seen in Table 3. The first column shows that in addition to self-placed ideology, operational ideology also

[15] While we do not examine the possibility here, controlling for ideology without taking account of the fact that race can affect respondents' perceptions of candidates' ideological locations can lead to underestimates of the effects of race on voting decisions (Jacobsmeier, 2009)

significantly affects evaluations of Obama. In this model, the effect of dog ownership is not significant. The next two models find significant effects for our racial attitudes measures, while dog ownership does show a significant, but greatly reduced, negative effect among white respondents.

Region, Race, and Voting Decisions

As should be clear from the previous discussion, the dog ownership variable in Mutz's model of Obama's advantage in approval ratings is at least partially due to the correlation between dog ownership and other important variables that affect approval of Obama, but are not included in her analysis. This becomes even clearer when we analyze the voting decisions of respondents. As Table 4 shows, once region and racial attitudes are accounted for, dog ownership no longer has a statistically significant effect on the likelihood that a respondent voted for Barack Obama in 2008. Moreover, among white respondents, the coefficient for dog ownership remains insignificant when operational ideology and racial attitudes are added to the models. In contrast, the importance of region, racial attitudes, and operational ideology are clear.

While we argue that the regional indicators in our models are important because they tap differences is ideology and racial attitudes between regions of the country, we would be remiss if we failed to comment on the fact that two of three region dummies remain significant even when controls for racial attitudes and operational ideology are included in the analysis. Why is region still important? We believe there are several likely explanations. First, there are likely regional differences in many politically relevant variables that are still not included in our models of candidate approval and voting behavior during the 2008 presidential election campaign. We believe we that we have included the major relevant factors, but undoubtedly there are things we

have missed, or that we have simply decided to omit for the sake of (relative) parsimony. We suspect, for instance, that a good part of what remains of the coefficient on dog ownership is due to not having an indicator variable for hunters included in the analysis. Hunting and dog-ownership are positively correlated at the state and regional levels, and hunting is negatively correlated with operational liberalism, racial liberalism, Democratic identification, and state-level support for Obama.[16]

Second, the importance of region is often interactive. This can be seen in Table 2, where it is clear that the effect of many independent variables varies by region.[17] Being Hispanic, for example, made more of a difference in approval ratings in the Northeast than it did in the South. Had such interactive effects been more fully incorporated in our models, the analysis would have been much less straightforward, but the importance of the regional dummies would likely have been reduced.

Third, survey measures are imperfect. We have already shown that the standard 7-point ideology scale used by Mutz and countless other scholars (including ourselves) means different things to people from different regions of the country. The inclusion of regional dummies helps the model make up for, at least to some extent, the imprecision and biases that, unfortunately, are rather common in social scientific research, and perhaps particularly so in survey research. We strongly suspect that the regional dummies we employ pick up to a certain degree on regional differences in many of the independent variables in our models.[18] If we had better measures of

[16] Another possibility is that dog ownership is partially tapping residence in rural areas. The simple dichotomous urban/rural variable in the NAES data is an imprecise measure of how rural the area that a respondent resides in is.
[17] Analysis using regional interaction terms confirms that such differences are statistically significant in many cases.
[18] For example, the measures of education and religiosity that we employ might provide a more accurate measure of these concepts at the individual level if region were incorporated into the measures. High school graduates in one region, for instance, might be better educated on average than high school graduates in another region.

all of these variables, it is highly likely that the importance of the regional indicators would be further decreased.

What, if anything, does our analysis say about the frequent use of variables like the South dummy in political research in general? We argue that the answer is context-dependent. There is little doubt that including regional indicator variables in analyses of American politics decreases bias in many cases. In short, it is often wise to employ such dummies. However, simply including a South dummy in a regression analysis and reasoning that "the South is just different" is less than theoretically satisfying, especially given that the political effects of living in the South may work very differently for members of different racial, ethnic, religious and political groups. We suggest that scholars take care to identify variables in their analyses, such as dog ownership, that may display cross-regional variation. We also suggest the researchers carefully consider interacting regional indicator variables with other key explanatory variables. Lastly, we wish to note that developing better measures of politically-relevant variables, while a goal of countless researchers, is particularly important when it comes to avoiding biases related to regional political differences.

Who Owns Dogs and Why?

A remaining piece of the puzzle is to understand why there are regional differences and racial differences in dog ownership to start with. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), 37.2 percent of American households included a dog in 2006 (AVMA 2007). Though there is little existing literature explaining why some people seek canine companionship, there are some clear geographic and demographic patterns. Along with the Mountain states, the Deep South (the Census' East South Central and West South Central

regional divisions) has the highest rates of dog ownership, while the Mid-Atlantic and New England states have the lowest rates. This geographic pattern of canine affinity mirrors political patterns evident in the American electorate with Red States showing high dog ownership rates and Blue States showing low rates. Dog ownership also displays demographic patterns that coincide with political attitudes that would favor conservative and Republican candidates. According to the NAES, there is a large gap in dog ownership between black and white respondents. People living in rural areas, gun owners, and homeowners also have higher rates of dog ownership.

To further explore the determinants of dog ownership, we estimated a logistic regression model including a battery of political, demographic[19] and regional variables. The results are presented in Table 5. Though demographic patterns of dog ownership correspond well with political patterns that would explain Mutz's results, our individual level analysis shows no significant effects of political predispositions. Instead, demographics dominate the model. Older, non-white men with lower levels of education are less likely to own dogs. Also, large families living in rural areas, homeowners, and gun owners are likely to own dogs. Most of these demographic factors coincide with those that would predict support for conservative and Republican candidates. Lastly, the model reveals strong regional effects. Unsurprisingly, Southern and Western respondents are significantly more likely than their Northeastern and Midwestern counterparts to own dogs.

The second model in Table 5 includes our measure of racial attitudes for white respondents. While the results are largely the same as the first model, the added racial attitudes measure shows a significant positive effect on the likelihood of dog ownership. Consistent with

[19] We also included the average winter temperature in the state that a respondent lived, as the prospect of walking the dog in cold, blustery condition might make dog ownership a less attractive prospect.

our previous analyses, those respondents that rate blacks lower on positive characteristics (relative to whites) are more likely to be dog owners. So, while there seems to be little direct relationship between political predispositions and dog ownership, there are many factors which jointly predict both dog ownership and lower evaluations for Obama. As expected, there is a strong regional component to dog ownership and significant relationships between racial attitudes, dog ownership and attitudes toward Obama.

Conclusion

Diana Mutz's discovery of and explanation for an apparent dog gap in American politics is both fascinating and entertaining. Unfortunately, when it comes to American public opinion and voting behavior, the dog gap, while being perhaps the furriest kind of gap, is also largely a spurious gap. When measures of operational ideology and racial attitudes are left out of the analysis, the regional variation in dog ownership taps a good deal of the regional variation in these variables, thus leading to omitted variable bias. When these variables are included, the importance of dog ownership is reduced to statistical insignificance.

Still, Mutz may still be on to something. After all, while the inclusion of relevant variables in her model renders dog ownership insignificant, the coefficient is still negative in all specifications, if small in magnitude in some. It may not come close in importance to, for example, the God gap, but nonetheless, the dog gap may have some small impact on elections. Indeed, in researching this topic, we found that 2008 was not the first time that presidential pets were on the minds of some voters.[20] After considering all of the evidence, however, we do not expect the effect of the dog ownership variable in Mutz's models to change in the 2012

[20] Interesting examples can be found at http://www.mwilliams.info/archive/2004/03/john-kerrys-dog.php and http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1205554/posts

presidential election even though the First Family has added a First Dog, and, as suggested by Figure 4, the President's likely opponent has a very negative public image when it comes to dog ownership.[21] In all likelihood, bringing Bo into the Obama family did little to alter the correlates of dog ownership that seem to be largely responsible for the dog gap, a gap that has been erroneously attributed, at least in part, to dog ownership itself.

Featuring the Baha Men[22] on campaign rally audio programs might serve to highlight the fact that Bo gets to wag his tail in the White House, but it would be unlikely to change the racial attitudes and ideological leanings of American voters. Bo is now a part of the Obama family, a fact which is likely of great consequence for Barack Obama on a personal level. When it comes to the election of 2012, however, the presence of a pooch that was so sorely lacking in 2008 is unlikely to do much good for the president. In the end, our analysis fits well with an already substantial body of research that shows that racial attitudes had a significant impact on many voters' evaluations of Barack Obama, and shows that these attitudes are responsible for much of the spurious correlation between dog ownership and negative evaluations of Barack Obama. Moreover, Obama is still going to have trouble with conservative Southern voters more generally, and man's best friend is unlikely to do much to change that.

In short, Bo is unlikely to fetch many votes for his owner. Given that fact, we have some advice for the president: Treat Bo well, Mr. Obama. If he is dog tired on a given day and expresses no desire to join you on the campaign trail, let the sleeping dog lie. Keep Bo happy. In Washington, it can be hard to find dependable friends.[23]

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[21] Mitt Romney (in)famously strapped his family dog to the roof of his car for a 12 hour road trip, running afoul of Massachusetts' animal cruelty laws.
[22] The performers who made the song "Who Let the Dogs Out?" a hit.
[23] If things do not go well for President Obama in November, he may also want to keep an observation made by Franklin P' Jones in mind: "Scratch a dog and you'll find a permanent job."

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Table 1. Replication of Models from Mutz (2010)

	Feeling Thermometer[1]				Vote Choice[2]			
	[1] Original		[2] Replication		[3] Original		[4] Replication	
Political Predispositions								
Republican	-25.63***	(2.50)	-26.80***	(0.85)	-1.36***	(0.18)	-2.09***	(0.08)
Democrat	22.68***	(2.49)	22.76***	(0.83)	1.34***	(0.18)	1.63***	(0.08)
Ideology	-9.29***	(0.28)	-8.36***	(0.26)	-0.56***	(0.02)	-0.86***	(0.03)
Economic Perceptions								
U.S. Economy	-7.97***	(0.49)	-6.37***	(2.53)	-0.59***	(0.05)	-0.81***	(0.29)
Family Finances	−3.53***	(0.34)	-4.19***	(0.94)	-0.20***	(0.03)	-0.32***	(0.11)
Demographics								
Age	-0.07**	(0.02)	0.06	(0.02)	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)
Education	1.45***	(0.21)	0.75	(0.20)	0.09***	(0.02)	0.14***	(0.02)
Gender (Female)	1.30*	(0.65)	0.86	(0.61)	0.02	(0.06)	-0.07	(0.07)
Income	0.18*	(0.09)	-0.02	(0.09)	0.02***	(0.01)	-0.01***	(0.01)
Nonwhite	21.36***	(0.84)	14.61***	(0.79)	1.34***	(0.08)	1.18***	(0.09)
Married	-2.08*	(0.80)	-1.08	(0.71)	-0.20**	(0.07)	-0.11**	(0.08)
Own Home	-0.20	(0.77)	-0.33	(0.83)	0.01	(0.07)	0.02	(0.10)
Minors Present	0.50	(0.84)	-1.52	(0.96)	-0.06	(0.07)	-0.11	(0.11)
Own Gun(s)	-5.75***	(0.68)	-4.55***	(0.65)	-0.46***	(0.06)	-0.45***	(0.07)
Metro/Rural	-0.10***	(0.93)	0.00***	(0.89)	-0.04	(0.08)	-0.03	(0.10)
Religiosity	-0.31	(0.22)	-0.52	(0.21)	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.08	(0.02)
Born Again	-2.53**	(0.74)	-1.48**	(0.71)	-0.34***	(0.07)	-0.31***	(0.08)
Household Size	-0.59*	(0.29)	-0.63*	(0.33)	-0.04	(0.03)	-0.06	(0.04)
Pet Ownership								
Dog	-3.09***	(0.66)	-2.46***	(0.63)	-0.17*	(0.06)	-0.15*	(0.07)
Cat	-0.47	(0.68)	-0.04	(0.64)	0.07	(0.06)	0.11	(0.07)
Horse	-2.24	(2.41)	-4.60	(2.33)	-0.27	(0.22)	-0.43	(0.27)
Reptile	-1.20	(1.93)	-1.63	(1.84)	-0.22	(0.17)	-0.38	(0.20)
Ferret/Gerbil	-0.70	(1.62)	-0.40	(1.54)	-0.02	(0.14)	0.07	(0.17)
Bird	1.54	(1.45)	0.44	(1.41)	0.11	(0.12)	0.12	(0.16)
Fish	-0.71	(0.94)	0.16	(0.90)	-0.06	(0.08)	-0.21*	(0.10)
Other Pet	2.61	(1.67)	-0.05	(1.59)	0.15	(0.15)	0.13	(0.19)
Constant	46.80***	(4.16)	44.93***	(2.58)	2.72***	(0.35)	4.05***	(0.29)
R^2	0.56		0.54		0.51		0.56	
N	14455		12084		15189		10861	

Note: Standard errors are shown in parentheses.
[1]OLS regressions
[2]Logistic regressions
***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05

Table 2. Alternative Specifications of the Mutz (2010) Models: Region, Race and Obama Feeling Thermometer Advantage

	[1] Regions and Races		[2] Northeast		[3] South		[4] Midwest		[5] West	
Political Predispositions										
Republican	-26.42***	(0.84)	-26.00***	(2.04)	-27.41***	(1.56)	-27.05***	(1.52)	-23.99***	(1.72)
Democrat	21.02***	(0.83)	14.91***	(1.89)	20.16***	(1.57)	25.15***	(1.52)	20.96***	(1.70)
Ideology	-8.32***	(0.26)	-10.25***	(0.64)	-7.65***	(0.46)	-7.43***	(0.47)	-9.27***	(0.54)
Economic Perceptions										
U.S. Economy	-6.66**	(2.50)	-1.76	(5.65)	-13.48**	(4.52)	-5.21	(4.65)	-3.87	(5.55)
Family Finances	-4.19***	(0.93)	-6.03*	(2.64)	-3.29*	(1.62)	-4.64**	(1.69)	-3.71*	(1.88)
Race										
Black (Non-Hispanic)	27.30***	(1.09)	23.26***	(2.71)	31.73***	(1.75)	24.69***	(2.15)	20.61***	(2.83)
Other (Non-Hispanic)	0.48	(2.10)	15.06*	(6.05)	-8.07	(4.98)	-7.32	(5.29)	1.87	(2.78)
Hispanic	5.90***	(1.27)	12.44***	(3.71)	5.92***	(2.20)	10.37**	(3.49)	2.29	(1.96)
Two or More Races (Non-Hispanic)	6.80**	(2.07)	9.18	(5.27)	5.34	(3.63)	10.66*	(4.16)	2.79	(3.96)
Region										
South	-2.27*	(0.89)	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Midwest	2.04*	(0.89)	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
West	1.86*	(0.94)	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Dog Ownership	-1.79**	(0.63)	-1.85	(1.60)	-2.12	(1.15)	-0.68	(1.15)	-2.58*	(1.28)
Constant	44.45***	(2.61)	55.87***	(6.20)	43.17***	(4.71)	37.45***	(4.72)	48.40***	(5.28)
R^2	0.55		0.50		0.58		0.56		0.57	
N	12084		2094		3768		3533		2686	

Notes: Demographic and other pet ownership variables from the model are not presented here. Standard errors are shown in parentheses.
***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05

Table 3. Alternative Specifications of the Mutz (2010) Models: Racial Attitudes, Ideology and Obama Feeling Thermometer Advantage

	[1] Issue-based Ideology		[2] Racial Attitudes		[3] Full Model	
Political Predispositions						
Republican	-19.68***	(0.91)	-23.94***	(0.90)	-18.95***	(0.91)
Democrat	14.81***	(0.90)	19.32***	(0.91)	14.91***	(0.90)
Ideology (Self-Placement)	-4.11***	(0.32)	-9.14***	(0.29)	-4.10***	(0.32)
Economic Perceptions						
U.S. Economy	-4.83	(2.90)	-5.12	(2.91)	-3.35	(2.90)
Family Finances	-2.67**	(1.02)	-4.60***	(1.03)	-2.78**	(1.01)
Region						
South	-2.10*	(0.98)	-2.72**	(0.99)	-1.89	(0.97)
Midwest	3.03**	(0.95)	2.13*	(0.96)	3.02**	(0.94)
West	1.05	(1.02)	1.66	(1.04)	0.55	(1.02)
Dog Ownership	-1.27	(0.68)	-1.99**	(0.69)	-1.63*	(0.68)
Issue-based Ideology	-16.87***	(0.51)	---	---	-16.32***	(0.51)
Racial Attitudes	---	---	3.09***	(0.21)	2.66***	(0.20)
Constant	27.17***	(2.93)	46.60***	(2.93)	29.65***	(2.92)
R^2	0.58		0.534		0.58	
N	9018		9564		8886	

Notes: Demographic and other pet ownership variables from the model are not presented here. The models only include white respondents. Standard errors are shown in parentheses.
***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05

Table 4. Alternative Specifications of the Mutz (2010) Models: Region, Race and Vote Choice

	[1] Regions and Races		[2] Issue-based Ideology		[3] Racial Attitudes		[4] Full Model	
Political Predispositions								
Republican	-2.05***	(0.08)	-1.73***	(0.10)	-2.00***	(0.09)	-1.69***	(0.10)
Democrat	1.55***	(0.08)	1.26***	(0.10)	1.50***	(0.09)	1.30***	(0.10)
Ideology (Self-Placement)	-0.88***	(0.03)	-0.50***	(0.04)	-0.90***	(0.04)	-0.50***	(0.04)
Economic Perceptions								
U.S. Economy	-0.78**	(0.30)	-0.72	(0.38)	-0.63	(0.34)	-0.62	(0.39)
Family Finances	-0.35**	(0.11)	-0.21	(0.15)	-0.32*	(0.13)	-0.20	(0.15)
Race								
Black (Non-Hispanic)	3.07***	(0.22)	---	---	---	---	---	---
Other (Non-Hispanic)	0.24	(0.24)	---	---	---	---	---	---
Hispanic	0.43**	(0.14)	---	---	---	---	---	---
Two or More Races (Non-Hispanic)	0.88***	(0.23)	---	---	---	---	---	---
Region								
South	-0.39***	(0.10)	-0.29*	(0.12)	-0.34**	(0.11)	-0.27*	(0.13)
Midwest	0.16	(0.10)	0.31**	(0.12)	0.18	(0.10)	0.31**	(0.12)
West	0.12	(0.11)	0.11	(.13)	0.15	(0.12)	0.08	(0.13)
Dog Ownership	-0.10	(0.07)	-0.10	(0.09)	-0.10	(0.08)	-0.12	(0.09)
Issue-based Ideology	---	---	-1.85**	(0.07)	---	---	-1.83***	(0.07)
Racial Attitudes	---	---	---	---	0.20***	(0.03)	0.15***	(0.03)
Constant	4.07***	(0.30)	2.94***	(0.38)	4.25***	(0.34)	3.04***	(0.39)
Psuedo-R^2	0.56		0.59		0.54		0.59	
N	10861		8156		8631		8043	

Notes: Demographic and other pet ownership variables from the model are not presented here. Models 2-4 include white respondents only. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05

Table 5. Determinants of Dog Ownership

	[1]		[2]	
Political Predispositions				
Republican	-0.23	(0.19)	-0.24	(0.25)
Democrat	-0.27	(0.20)	-0.31	(0.25)
Ideology (Self-Placement)	0.03	(0.03)	0.01	(0.04)
Issue-based Ideology	0.05	(0.04)	0.06	(0.03)
Demographics				
Age	-0.02***	(0.00)	-0.02***	(0.00)
Education	-0.09***	(0.01)	-0.11***	(0.02)
Gender (female)	0.24***	(0.04)	0.26***	(0.04)
Income	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Black (Non-Hispanic)	-0.85***	(0.07)		
Other (Non-Hispanic)	-0.85***	(0.16)		
Hispanic	-0.04	(0.07)		
Two or More Races (Non-Hispanic)	0.10	(0.15)		
Married	0.18***	(0.05)	0.19***	(0.05)
Own Home	0.79***	(0.09)	0.70***	(0.10)
Minors Present	0.16*	(0.08)	0.11	(0.08)
Own Gun(s)	0.49***	(0.04)	0.47***	(0.05)
Metro/Rural	0.34***	(0.05)	0.32***	(0.06)
Religiosity	-0.09***	(0.02)	-0.10***	(0.02)
Born Again	0.04	(0.05)	0.10	(0.06)
Household Size	0.24***	(0.03)	0.23***	(0.04)
Winter Temperature (State Avg.)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Region				
South	0.38***	(0.11)	0.41***	(0.11)
Midwest	0.19*	(0.09)	0.16*	(0.08)
West	0.32**	(0.10)	0.31**	(0.10)
Racial Attitudes	---	---	0.03*	(0.01)
Constant	-0.76*	(0.34)	-0.44	(0.41)
Psuedo-R^2	0.09		0.08	
N	13049		10310	

Note: Standard errors are shown in parentheses and clustered by state. Model 2 includes white respondents only. ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05

Figure 1. Examples of Obama's Canine Campaign Tactics

Figure 2. Dog Ownership and Obama's Approval Rating Advantage by Region

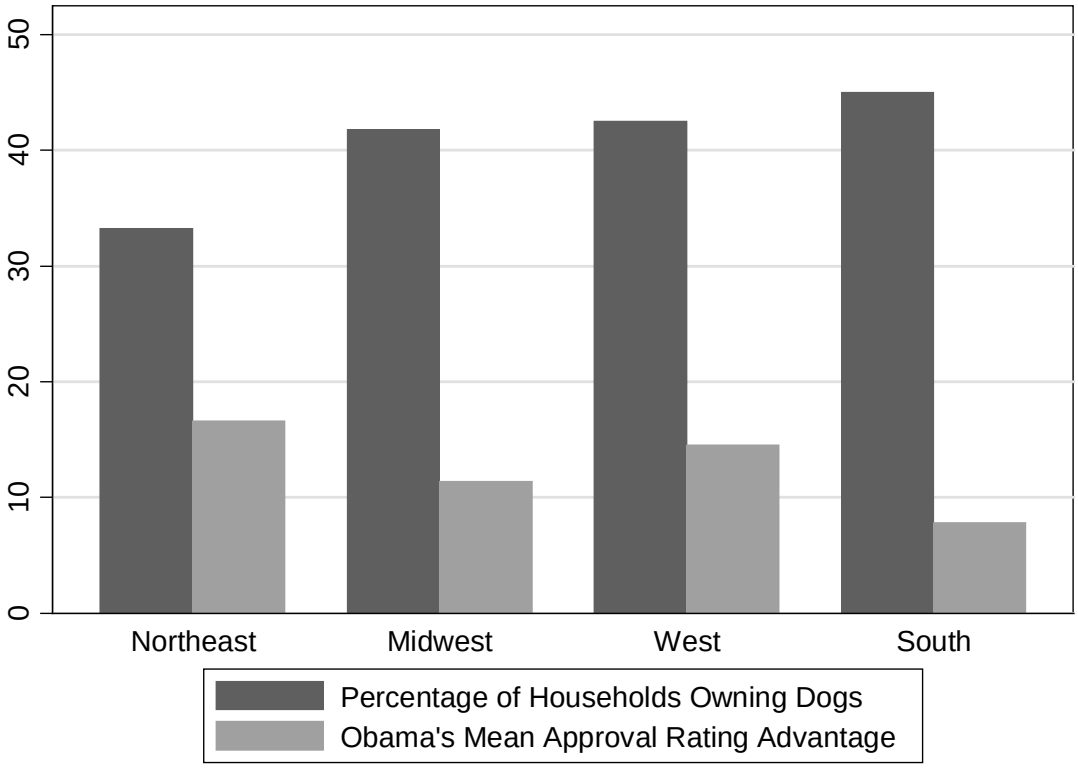

Figure 3. State-Level Racial Prejudice vs. Dog Ownership

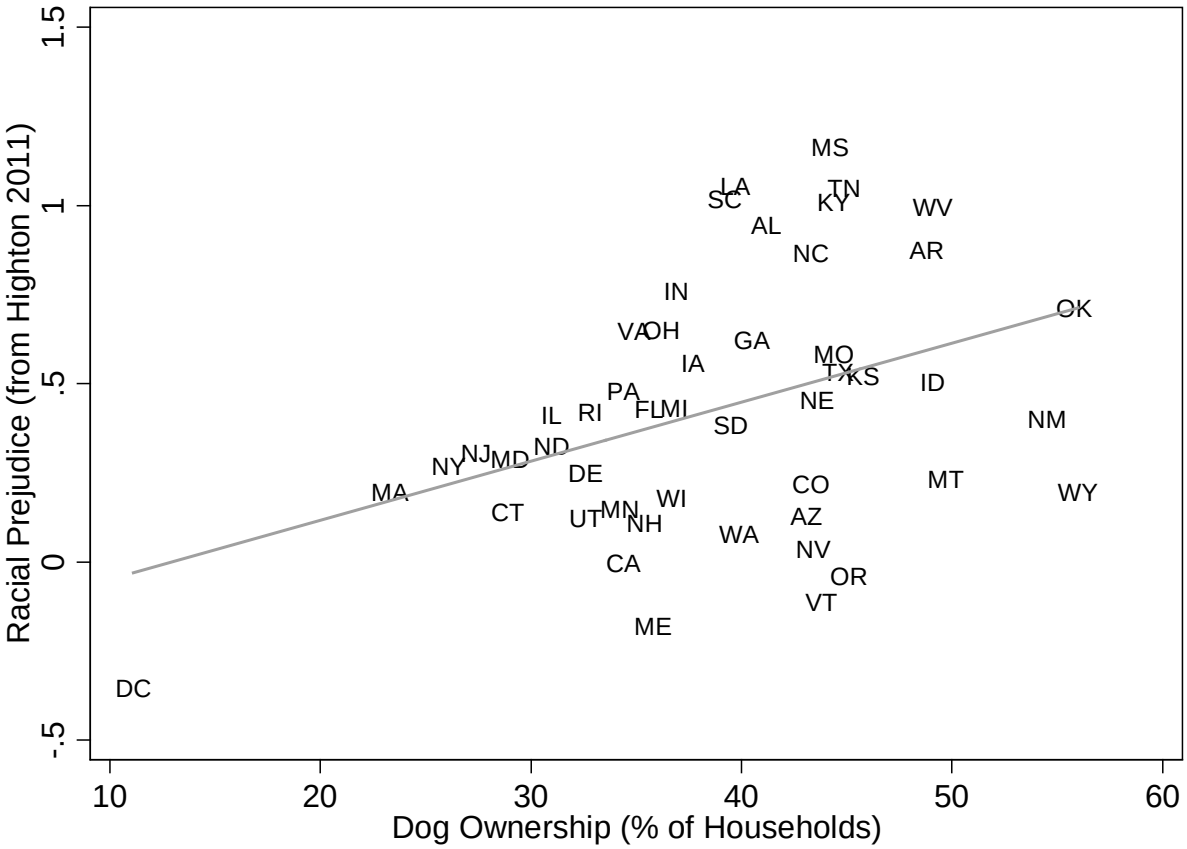

Figure 4. Mitt Romney's Dog Problem