PROFESSION SYMPOSIUM

Who's Able to Do Political Science Work? My Experience with Exit Polling and What It Reveals about Issues of Race and Equity

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In the summer of 2018, a series of discussions emerged on social media describing the experiences of Black Americans being treated with suspicion while engaging in routine activities. These activities included grilling burgers at the park (Newsbeat 2018a), relaxing at a swimming pool (Perez 2018), checking out of an Airbnb rental (Criss and Vera 2018), and selling water on a public sidewalk (Newsbeat 2018b). As a Black American woman, these stories felt familiar. Yet, when I was confronted with my own experience of being treated with suspicion when conducting surveys in my role as a political science researcher, I was caught off guard, hurt, and angry.

For scholars studying American politics, administering a survey immediately after voters exit their polling place is a routine yet crucially important part of understanding the American electorate. In 2018 and 2019, I administered exit polls in West Virginia, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. When a colleague invited me to join a team of researchers going into the field, I viewed this work as an unremarkable part of my job as a political scientist. My thinking is different now. After experiencing anxiety around my personal safety and being expelled from a township by an overzealous election administrator, I have new perspective on how race, power, and bureaucratic discretion manifest and can affect a supposedly innocuous part of the American political process.

When I began conducting exit polls, I was most concerned about traveling to West Virginia. One of the first conversations I had with the colleague who invited me on the trip was about how my identity as a Black woman might affect my experience. We were both familiar with literature that suggests that the race (e.g., Campbell 1981; Cotter, Cohen, and Coulter 1982; Davis 1997) and gender (e.g., Huddy et al. 1997; Kane and Macaulay 1993) of the person administering a survey affects survey responses. However, his concern was about something different. He asked me, "Will you feel safe?" West Virginia is a largely rural and racially homogeneous state that was completely unfamiliar to me. I was definitely afraid. Still, I decided against allowing my anxiety to rob me of a great professional experience. My three colleagues—one white woman and two white men—and I traveled to West Virginia to administer surveys during the contentious primary election in May 2018.

We remained cautious, however. We researched state electioneering laws, which restrict activities outside of polling places in an effort to prevent campaign workers from interfering with voting. These laws vary widely across states. Through our research, we learned that exit polling is exempt from these restrictions in West Virginia. Nevertheless, we ultimately selected more urban polling places because we thought that racial attitudes would be more liberal in these areas and that I would be better received.

Despite our careful planning, I faced challenges during the trip. We woke up at 5:00 a.m. the day of the election so that we would be onsite to greet voters when the polls opened at 6:30 a.m. The group decided that I would be dropped off first. As soon as we arrived, we immediately sensed that poll workers were not happy about me standing outside of their voting location. It seemed that they viewed me with suspicion. I repeatedly stated that I understood that I needed to be 200 feet from the door. Nevertheless, before my colleagues began to drive away, one of the poll workers came out and showed me exactly where she wanted me to stand. She pointed to a spot that was one inch to the left of where I currently was positioned. From my perspective, her insisting that I move one inch felt like a power play. For all of us, it became clear that it was probably best for me to leave. That day, I worked at another location with one of my white male colleagues. We began exit polling at 8:00 a.m.

To be clear, each of us was an outsider that day. It was our first time in West Virginia, and we had no close friends or family there. We were researchers coming from an Ivy League school who were asking personal questions about people's political beliefs and behavior. We all were nervous about entering an unfamiliar community.

Although we all felt like outsiders that day, being a Black woman added another facet to the experience that was distinct from that of my colleagues. People stared at me as if I were confusing them or unexpected in their environment. Some bluntly blurted out, "What's your business here?" Others were more polite but questioned my presence just the same.

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People also were curious about my colleagues, but when we shared our experiences, their interactions sounded different. They did not feel like they were under surveillance. For the most part, voters did not stare at them in confusion. The mostly white voters wondered what they were doing there but not whether they should be allowed in their space. They asked why my colleagues were approaching people with a clipboard, but they did not seem to question whether they should be allowed in their community in the first place. This difference is subtle but powerful.

To my surprise, I encountered the most formidable challenge while conducting an exit poll in New Jersey several weeks later. There, the county clerk ejected me from her South Jersey township. She explained that the state did not want their citizens "harassed" after they voted. I am well aware of the history of voter intimidation in many parts of the country, and I empathize with this administrator's desire to protect the integrity of the election. Yet, there were clear problems with what happened that day.

First, I was the only person on a team of seven researchers to be ejected from a polling place. In fact, one of my peers was given donuts and coffee by poll workers. Another was given a chair so that she could be comfortable. Yet another was allowed to use the bathroom inside the polling place. It is important to note that I was the only person of color in the field that day.

Second, I was informed that I could not stand near the building or in the adjacent parking lot. Even after showing the poll workers the state law, which stated that exit polls were allowed as long as individuals were standing 100 feet away from the polling place, I was told I needed to leave. Our conversation was no longer about me being compliant with state law—I was being told that I was not allowed to stand on public property.

What happened to me that day was not only humiliating; it also was a violation of my constitutional rights. Yet, I found myself with limited options in the moment. Who could I call? The American Civil Liberties Union might provide recourse in the long run, but what about my ability to exercise my rights that day? Should I call the police instead? I wondered if it was reasonable to expect a police officer to be knowledgeable about and enforce election laws. But, on a more fundamental level, would calling the police escalate the situation and risk my safety? It was not lost on me that I was a Black woman in a small, majority-white town.

Since that day, I have been grappling with what justice and accountability look like in a context in which an apology, if that is even a plausible outcome, comes after Election Day concludes—and, with it, the possibility of successfully administering one's survey. I am still unsure. However, my experience prompted several thoughts about race, power, bureaucracy, and political science research.

My experiences with exit polling showcase how bureaucratic discretion can provide an opening for racial bias to enter into the democratic process. A rich literature examines how bureaucratic discretion often affects how public policies are implemented and enforced along racial lines (e.g., Keiser, Mueser, and Choi 2004). Yet, my experience made clear another important dimension of this problem: the opaque language in many local statutes may allow racism to emerge in situations in which oversight is limited, and there is little recourse for those who are directly affected.

I collected data about electioneering rules for each state from the National Association of Secretaries of State (2020) for a more precise sense of how these rules vary in different contexts. Not surprisingly, state rules and regulations vary wildly. For example, the distance at which individuals are required to stand ranges from 30 feet in Alabama to 600 feet in Louisiana. In Vermont and Washington state, electioneering activities are prohibited only inside the polling-station building. In New Hampshire and North Carolina, the moderator at the polling site determines the distance. In other words, political scientists face very different barriers to data collection depending on where they live or conduct research.

My experience also sheds new light on the literature about the race-of-interviewer effects. Political scientists often treat this issue as a methodological concern: How do interviewer attributes affect survey responses and potentially bias our data? However, my experiences highlight a broader, structural question that we must address as the discipline becomes more

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Nevertheless, my experience revealed that even when we do our best to prepare, there always will be dynamics that we cannot anticipate. Moreover, as researchers who occupy different positionalities, being intentional does not guarantee that we will have the same research experiences and outcomes.

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diverse: How do the demographic attributes of interviewers affect how they are treated while in the field and their ability to collect data in the first place?

I searched—to no avail—for other people's exit-polling stories because I wondered if other Black scholars had written about similar experiences. This void motivated me to share my story with the hope that it would spark a larger conversation about race, equity, and inclusion in the discipline.

Although I did not find studies that engaged explicitly with exit polling, comparative politics scholars have long wrestled with issues of scholars' positionality when conducting fieldwork in other countries (Henderson 2009; Ortbals and Rincker 2009; Townsend-Bell 2009). For instance, Townsend-Bell (2009, 311) argued that researchers are constantly negotiating "sticky issues of race, class, and gender" and must consider how our identities influence dynamics between us, the researchers, and our subjects, the researched. Part of preparing for fieldwork, she argued, is anticipating these challenges before going into the field.

In our case, we did just that. We tracked down the local electioneering statutes and made copies to ensure we were prepared if questioned by poll workers. Townsend-Bell (2009) referred to this type of preparation as "objective considerations." We also heeded her advice about thoughtfully considering our relationship to and fit with the community we were entering.

Nevertheless, my experience revealed that even when we do our best to prepare, there always will be dynamics that we cannot anticipate. Moreover, as researchers who occupy different positionalities, being intentional does not guarantee that we will have the same research experiences and outcomes. In at least some cases, these divergent experiences likely will reinforce existing racialized, gendered, and classed inequities in the discipline.

Issues of bias can emerge at *every* stage of research production. Yet, as political scientists, when we discuss making the discipline more inclusive, we often focus on increasing access to graduate education, funding opportunities, and mentorship for scholars from underrepresented backgrounds. Without a doubt, these are important factors in making research and academic spaces more inclusive. However, my experience points to a more basic question: Who is able to do political science work in the first place? Furthermore, what are the implications of these varying levels of access for a researcher's career trajectory?

I was able to participate in exit polling in three states because I was a postdoctoral fellow in a well-resourced department, with colleagues who welcomed me into the research community. This is the best-case scenario. Nevertheless, I found myself in the position of not being able to collect data that I needed for my research. Fortunately, I was part of a large research team and still was able to access great data, but what about those who are not so fortunate?

As a researcher with unequivocal support from my colleagues, I am grateful that I can write publicly about my deflating experiences with racism and prejudice. I write because it is important to give voice to these experiences—my experiences, as a Black woman and researcher in the discipline. ■

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