

The Causes and Consequences of “Birtherism”

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Abstract: This paper examines the development of birtherism--the belief that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and is thus ineligible to serve as President of the United States. In addition to tracing the ebb and flow of birther attitudes in the general public, the paper also examines the factors that contribute to birtherism, especially its relationship to racial resentment.

Since he first emerged as a serious presidential candidate, Barack Obama has been dogged by a series of persistent falsehoods about his citizenship and eligibility to serve as President of the United States. The proponents of this view, the so-called “birthers,” argue (with variations) that President Obama was born outside of the United States and therefore is not a “natural born citizen” as required to serve as President by the Constitution. Despite the authoritative and repeated refutations of these rumors, a significant portion of the American public still expresses support for birtherism. In this article, I examine the causes of birtherism and demonstrate that it is almost completely resistant to factual correction and is strongly related to partisanship and attitudes about race.

Background: The Rise of Birtherism

Rumors about Barack Obama began almost as soon as his name was floated as a possible presidential candidate. Among these were allegations that Obama was a Muslim and that he had been educated in a madrassa in Indonesia. Rumors about Obama’s birth first began in the spring of 2008 as he battled Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries but became more widespread after he clinched his party’s nomination in June of that year.¹ That month, the Obama campaign established a webpage to rebut various falsehoods about him and included a copy of his short-form birth certificate. In addition, the fact-checking site, PoliFact, published its own debunking of the claims.

Despite this, the rumors became more widespread and now included the claim that Obama's short-form birth certificate was a forgery or inadequate proof that he was indeed born in Hawaii. In August 2008, Philip Berg, a Democratic activist and supporter of Hillary Clinton, filed suit in federal court to have Obama's name removed from the ballot in Pennsylvania, alleging that Obama was born in Kenya and thus ineligible to become president. The judge dismissed the suit in October, stating that Berg lacked standing and that his claims were "frivolous and not worthy of discussion."² Nonetheless, several other lawsuits have been filed challenging Obama's constitutional eligibility to serve as president, all of which have been dismissed as utterly without legal merit.

Ironically, Republican candidate John McCain, and not Barack Obama, was actually born outside of the United States. McCain was born in the Panama Canal Zone where his father served in the U.S. Navy.³ To dispel any doubts about McCain's eligibility, the U.S. Senate passed a non-binding resolution (cosponsored by Senator Barack Obama) declaring that McCain was indeed a natural born citizen. Nonetheless, some legal scholars continued to dispute McCain's eligibility.⁴ That fall, a federal court judge in California dismissed a case seeking to have McCain taken off the ballot in that state, arguing that it was "highly probable" that McCain was a natural born citizen.⁵ Eventually, the issue was made moot when McCain lost the election. Nonetheless, despite McCain's actual birth outside of the U.S. and the credible legal issues this raised, this issue received only a fraction of the attention devoted to baseless accusations about Obama's birth.

Obama's election and inauguration as president failed to end the rumors about his citizenship. In fact, birtherism became increasingly prevalent among conservative activists and spilled over into the mainstream media in July 2009 when Lou Dobbs questioned Obama's citizenship on his CNN show.⁶ While some prominent Republican political figures like Karl Rove stated unequivocally that President Obama was a U.S. citizen, many others expressed doubts about the president's birth certificate or claimed that the president had not done enough to prove his citizenship.⁷

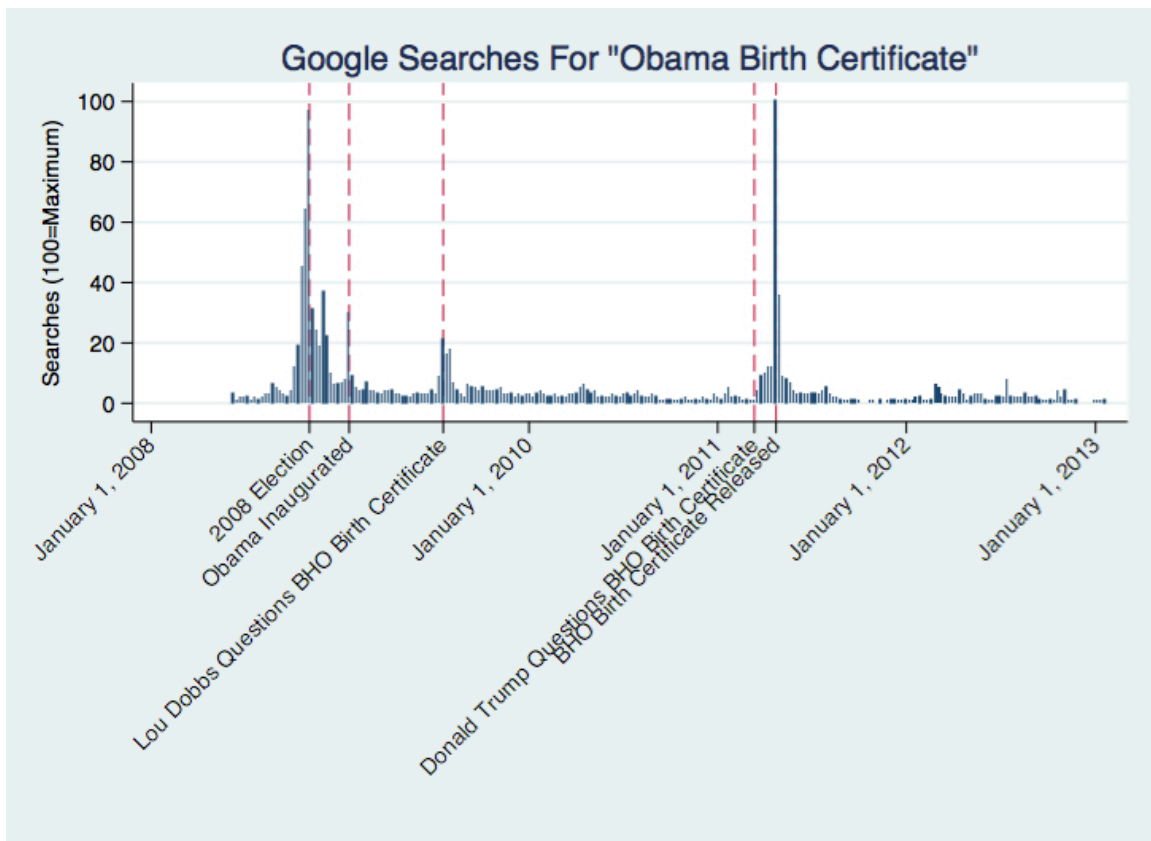
The birther controversy reached a fever pitch in the spring of 2011 with the entrance of Donald Trump. A prominent businessman and media figure since the 1980s, by 2011 Trump had become the star of a top-rated television reality show, an increasingly vocal critic of the president, and a possible Republican presidential candidate. In a March 2011 interview, Trump expressed doubts about President Obama's citizenship. Over the next few weeks, Trump repeated his claims in numerous network interviews and added that private investigators he had sent to Hawaii to research the president's records "could not believe what they're finding."⁸ Trump's increasing prominence in the birther controversy corresponded with a rise in support for his possible candidacy. By mid-April, polls for the GOP nomination showed Trump as one of the leading candidates.⁹

With Trump's allegations and the birther issue dominating the media, President Obama concluded that while the birther issue might be of political benefit to him by painting his opponents as conspiracy theorists, the issue had become bad for the country and needed to be put to rest.¹⁰ On April 27, 2011 the White House

released the president's long-form birth certificate. Despite this, questions about Obama's citizenship did not go away. Many birthers claimed that Obama's long-form birth certificate was a forgery and even as late as June 2013, Republican Congressman Jeff Duncan, chairman of the subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations, and Management of the House Homeland Security Committee, raised doubts about the Obama's "validity" as president.¹¹

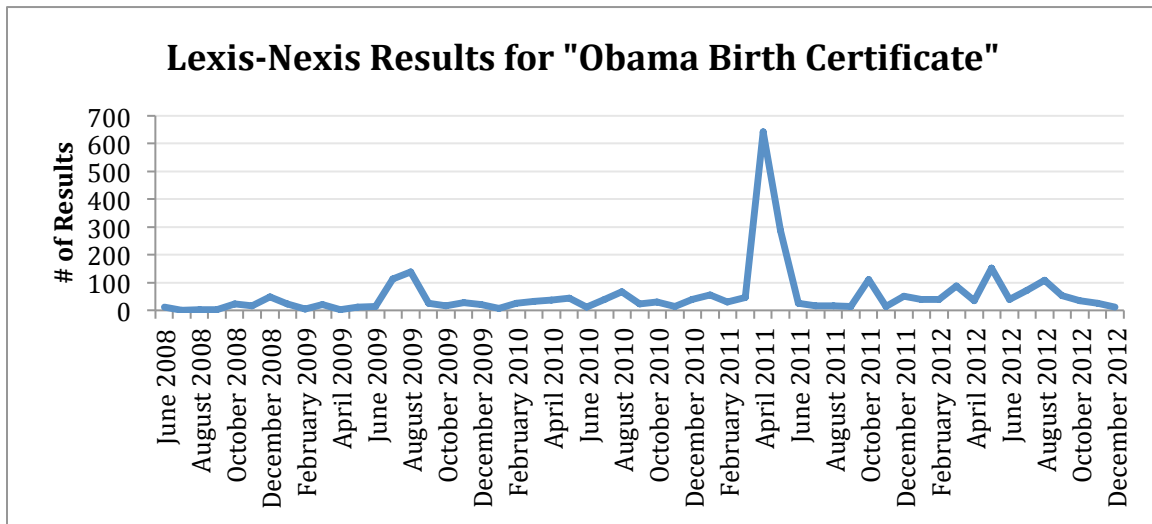
The graph below, showing Google searches for "Barack Obama birth certificate" shows how various political and media events have triggered public interest in the birther controversy. Searches shot up during the fall 2008 campaign and during the November election. Searches declined after that, but surged again in January 2009 with Obama's inauguration and then again in July and August 2009 when Lou Dobbs questioned Obama's citizenship on his CNN show. Searches reached new peak in the spring of 2011, with Donald Trump's allegations and the subsequent release of the president's long-form birth certificate. Since then, searches regarding President Obama's birth certificate have tapered off, but have not disappeared entirely.

Graph 1:



A similar pattern is evident in the graph below which shows the number of Lexis-Nexis results from all U.S. newspapers for the search term "Obama birth certificate." News coverage of the topic was relatively low, with a small surge in the summer of 2009 and a very large surge in the spring of 2011.

Graph 2:



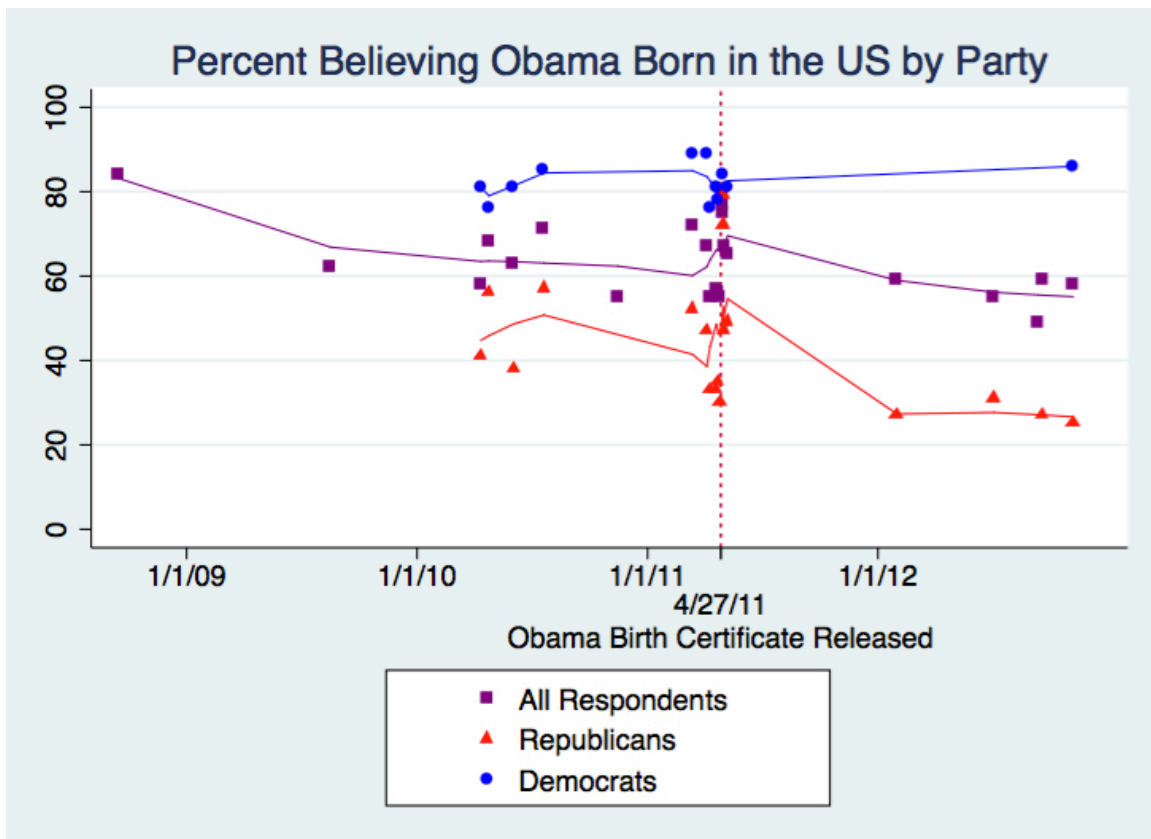
Birtherism in Public Opinion

Initially, few people questioned whether Barack Obama had been born outside of the U.S. The first survey on the topic was an AP/Yahoo! News poll in September 2008 and it found that 84 percent believed that Barack Obama had been born somewhere in the United States (Illinois 25 percent, Hawaii 47 percent, Kansas 12 percent), with only 12 percent answering Indonesia and 4 percent unsure.¹²

Over time, however, birtherism gained greater traction among the public. Graph 3 shows the results for all publicly available polls that included a question about President Obama's place of birth. Results indicate the percentage of respondents who stated that they believe Barack Obama was born in the U.S. Responses are broken down by party where available. Blue circles represent Democrats, red triangles represent Republicans, and overall results are represented by purple squares. A smoothed line is incorporated to help indicate trends.

Overall, those stating that they believe President Obama was born in the US have declined over time, but as the graph shows, this is largely the result of declining support among Republicans. Democrats, on the other hand, have consistently and overwhelmingly believed that President Obama was born in the United States.

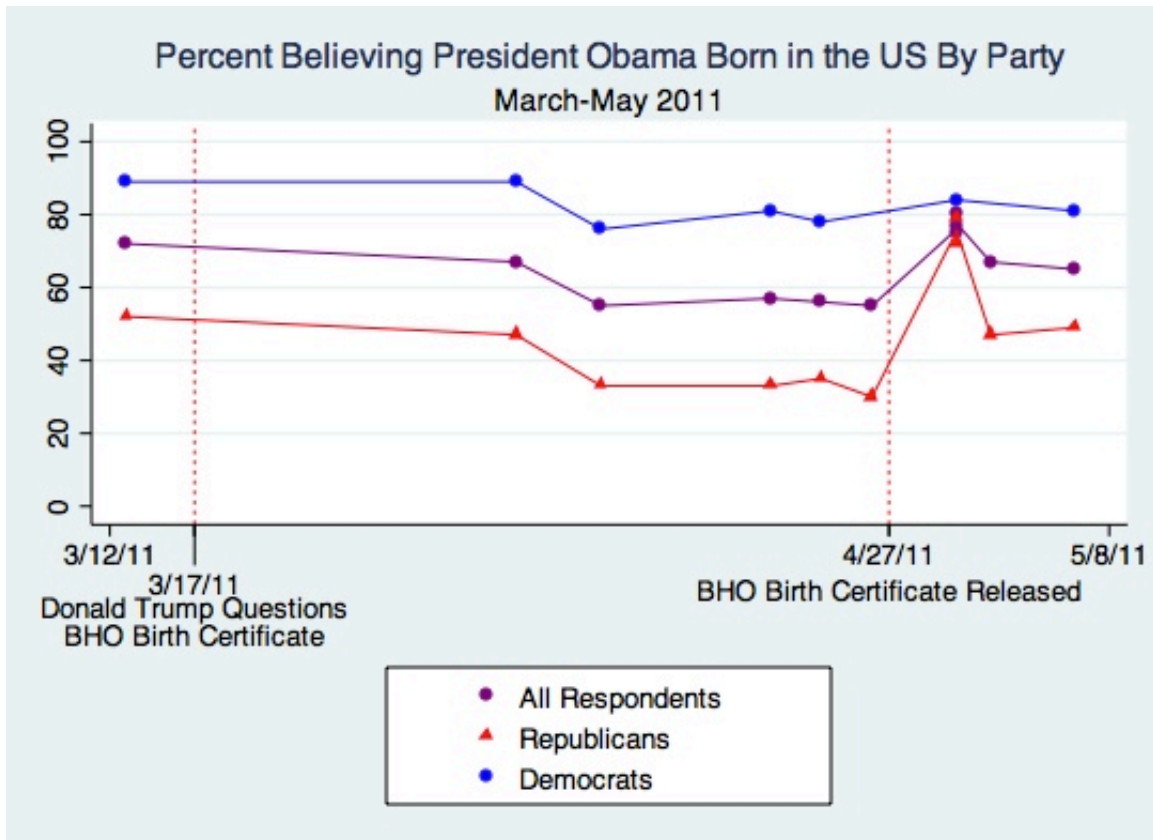
Graph 3:



Unfortunately, the above graph fails to fully describe the large swings in public opinion in the spring of 2011 surrounding Donald Trump's comments and the President's release of his long-form birth certificate. To remedy this, Graph 4 looks only at surveys between March and May 2011 and it shows that Trump's comments

and their coverage in the media caused a significant decline in the percent of those who believe the President was born in the U.S. A CNN poll completed on March 12 (before Trump's comments) showed that 72 percent of Americans believed that Obama was born in the US. Over the next few weeks, polls showed a decline in this number. The average of the polls released after Trump's comments but before the release of the President's birth certificate showed an average of only 58 percent believing that Obama was born in the U.S., a decline of 14 percentage points. This decline occurred among all groups, but especially among Republicans. Democrats went from 89 percent in the March 12 poll, to an average of 81 percent in the polls between March 17 and April 26, a decline of 8 percentage points. In that same period, however, Republican belief in Obama's U.S. citizenship fell from 52 percent to 36 percent, a decline of 16 percentage points.

Graph 4:



With the release of President Obama’s birth certificate on April 27, 2011, all of this changed. In three polls taken within a week of the release, belief in Obama’s U.S. citizenship jumped to an average of 77 percent. Moreover, this belief was shared by both Democrats and Republicans. Two of the three polls include results for Republicans, 72 and 79 percent of who expressed the belief that President Obama was born in the U.S.

Despite the authoritative refuting of birther claims by the release of the President’s birth certificate, this shift in opinion proved to be extremely short-lived. Two polls taken over the following week (May 3 and 8), show that belief in

President Obama's citizenship fell back approximately to the level where it was before the Trump statements. This decline was almost solely the result of shifts among Republicans, who went from over 70 percent believing Obama was born in the U. S. to 50 percent or less. On the other hand, Democrats' belief in Obama's U.S. citizenship remained over 80 percent.

Over time, birtherism has reasserted itself. In the five polls in 2012 asking about President Obama's citizenship, an average of 56 percent of respondents agreed that the President was born in the U.S., levels approximately equal to that at the height of the Trump controversy and prior to the release of the President's birth certificate. In addition, this decline in belief in the President's U.S. citizenship is largely concentrated among Republicans. Of the five 2012 polls mentioned, four included results for Republicans, of whom an average of only 28 percent believed that the President was born in the U.S. Only one of the five polls included results for Democrats, but among this group, 86 percent stated that they believed that Barack Obama was born in the United States.

Since the 2012 election, the birther controversy has receded somewhat, but beliefs on the issue remain largely unchanged. The most recent poll on this issue, conducted by YouGov in February 2014, shows that 62 percent of respondents believe that Obama was born in the U.S. Among Republicans only 34 percent believe that Obama was born in the U.S., compared to 84% of Democrats.¹³

These swings in birther beliefs are consistent with the research of Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. They show that misperceptions are often rooted in

partisan beliefs and communicated by partisan actors, and as such are extremely difficult to correct.¹⁴

Defining Birtherism

Any attempt to exam the specific content of birtherism entails two problems. First, survey response to questions about President Obama’s place of birth generally include a large number of don’t know or refused to answer responses. In several polls, as many as approximately 20 percent of respondents are in these categories. On the one hand, these respondents might be genuinely confused or undecided about the issue, given the competing claims and counter-claims. On the other hand, the controversial nature of the topic might make some people unwilling to reveal their true opinions.

A second problem with examining attitudes on birtherism is determining if respondents understand the implications of their beliefs. Do all birthers really believe that Barack Obama is a fraudulent president? Certainly this is true of the most vocal and persistent birthers, but how widespread is this view among ordinary Americans who believe that Obama might have been born outside of the U.S.? Most Americans lack basic knowledge about the Constitution so it seems to safe to assume that few people understand a more obscure constitutional provision like the “natural born citizen” clause.¹⁵ As a result, many of those who believe that Barack Obama was born outside of the U.S. may not realize that this makes him ineligible to serve as president. Indeed, it may be that if they were aware of the “natural born citizen” clause, they might revise their opinion about Obama’s place of birth.

To better understand the content of birtherism, I asked a series of questions on the topic in a module of the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES survey was conducted as an online survey by YouGov/Polimetrix in two waves: pre and post-election. My component of the pre-election wave surveyed 1000 people between October 1 and November 5, 2012. The post-election wave surveyed 837 of the pre-election wave respondents between November 7 and December 9, 2012. The margin of error for the pre-election wave is approximately +/- 3.1 percent and for the post-election wave approximately +/- 3.4 percent. All results have been weighted for accuracy.

The first question asked “Where was Barack Obama born?” Respondents could choose, “In the United States,” “Outside of the United States,” or “Don’t Know/Not Sure.” The responses were as follows:

Table 1:

“Where Was Barack Obama Born?”	%	n
In the United States	58.4	582
Outside of the United States	21.2	211
Don’t Know/Not Sure	20.4	203

To assess whether those in the “Don’t Know/Not Sure” category were genuinely undecided or if they were just reluctant to give a clear answer on a controversial topic, those who answered either “Outside of the United States,” or “Don’t Know/Not Sure” were then asked where they think Obama was born. Responses were open ended. Of those who said “Don’t Know/Not Sure,” responses fell into the following categories.

Table 2:

“Where Do You Think Barack Obama Was Born?”		%	n
Birthers	Africa	30.6	45
	Asia	4.8	7
	Other Part of the World	2.7	4
	Don’t Know/Birther	7.5	11
		45.6	78
Non-Birthers	Genuine Don’t Know	46.3	68
	United States	8.2	12
		54.4	80

The table shows that those in the initial “Don’t Know/Not Sure” category relatively evenly split between the birthers and non-birthers. In the non-birther category are those who genuinely did not know where Obama was born (46.3 percent) or believed that Obama was born somewhere in the United States (8.2 percent). Included in the birther category are those with responses mentioning that they believed Obama was born somewhere outside of the U.S. (Africa 30.6 percent, Asia 4.8 percent, or other part of the world 2.7 percent), or by giving a response that didn’t mention a particular part of the world, but included comments indicating their belief in birtherism (7.5 percent). Examples of comments in this category include statements like “[G]ood question—let’s see the real birth certificate” or “Don’t know, but he has shown no legitimate [c]ertificate.”

To determine if respondents believed that being born outside of the United States would make Obama constitutionally ineligible to serve as president, we asked the following question of those who initially stated that they believed Obama was born outside of the U.S. or responded “Don’t Know/Not Sure”: “Do you think that if

Barack Obama was born outside of the United States that makes him ineligible under the US Constitution to be president?” Responses to this question showed that 72 percent of those asked believe that being born outside of the U.S. makes Obama ineligible to be president, 16 percent thinks it does not, and 12 percent were unsure.

From the information gathered from these three question, I define birthers as anyone who believes that Barack Obama was born outside of the United States (either initially or in the follow-up, open-ended question) and believes that this makes him ineligible to serve as president. Using this definition, I find that birthers constitute 23 percent of the weighted sample.

Who Are the Birthers?

An analysis of the birthers yields several salient characteristics. First, birthers are overwhelming white. As the following table shows, birthers are 29 percent of Whites, but are nearly non-existent or nearly so among Blacks and Latinos. Birthers are nearly 16 percent of those in other racial and ethnic categories, but this result may be the result of a small sample size (n=57). Overall, whites make up 94 percent of all birthers, compared to just 74 percent of all survey respondents.

Table 3:

	% Birthers	n
White	29.0	743
Black	0.0	120
Latino	0.1	76
Other	15.8	57

In addition to being overwhelming White, birthers are concentrated heavily among Republicans. Birthers make up only a tiny fraction of Democrats and a relatively small proportion of independents, but they are a majority of all Republicans.

Table 4:

	% Birthers	n
Strong Democrat	1.8	230
Not Very Strong Democrat	4.9	124
Lean Democrat	5.2	111
All Democrats	3.4	465
Independent	17.8	158
Lean Republican	65.6	108
Not Very Strong Republican	33.9	86
Strong Republican	58.1	139
All Republicans	54.3	333
Total	23.6	956

Birthers are also much more prevalent among racial conservatives. To assess racial attitudes, I used the four questions of the racial resentment battery. The concept of racial resentment was developed by Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders (1996) as a way to measure symbolic racism, racism that was rooted less in traditional stereotypes of black biological inferiority and more in contemporary view of the moral character of black Americans. According to Kinder and Sanders, racial resentment is based on the view that “blacks do not try hard enough to overcome the difficulties they face and that they take what they have not earned.” (106). I believe that measures of racial resentment provide the most accurate view of racial attitudes since racial resentment is measured along a number of different axes and, as Kinder and Sander have

shown, it is strongly related to attitudes on a number of political issues and policies. Moreover, the racial resentment measure has been subject to significant scrutiny and validation.¹⁶

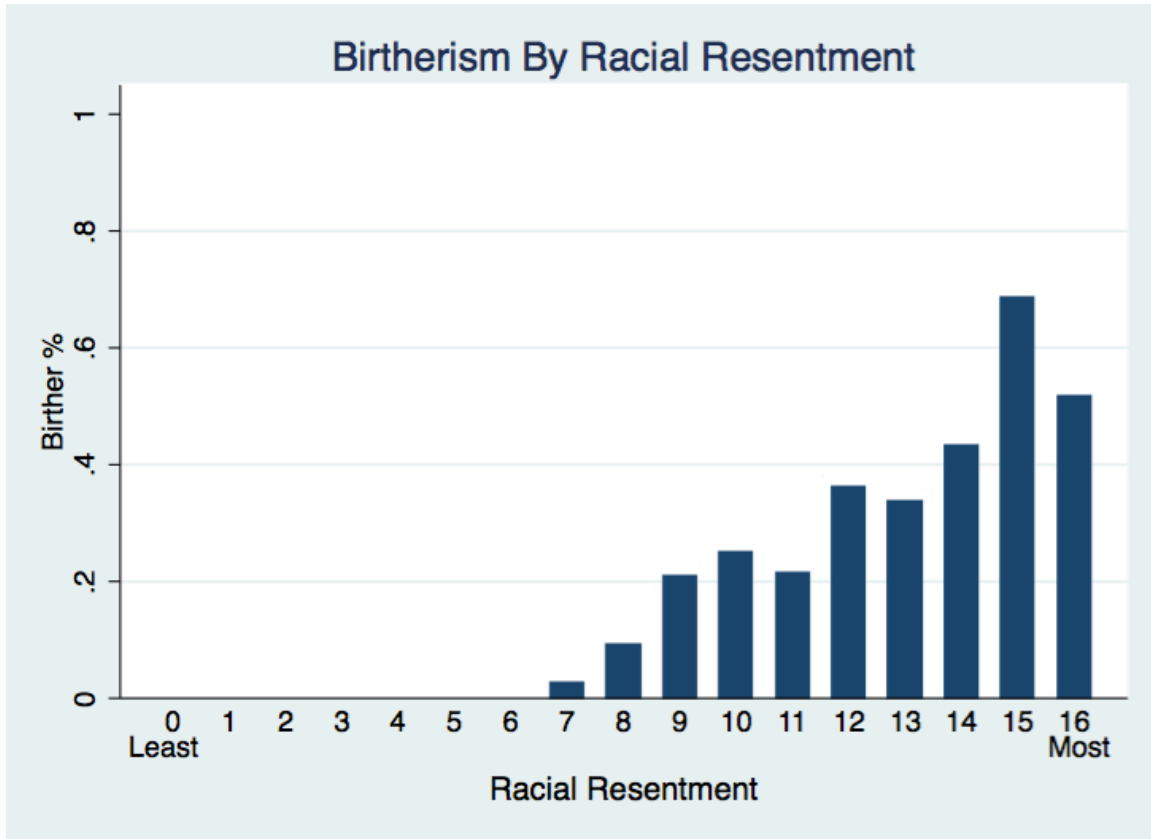
The racial resentment variable is an index constructed of responses to four questions:

- *Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.*
- *Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should to the same without any special favors.*
- *It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.*
- *Over the past few years blacks have gotten less than they deserve.*

Responses to these questions were scaled between 1 (agree strongly) and 5 (disagree strongly). The index is the sum of the responses and ranges from 0 (least resentful) to 16 (most resentful).

The next table shows the percentage of birthers for each category of racial resentment. The table indicates that birtherism is nonexistent among those in the six lowest six categories of racial resentment. After that, however, birtherism rises rapidly with increasingly levels of racial resentment. In fact, half of all birthers are located in the three highest categories of racial resentment, compared to only 22 percent of the total population.

Graph 5:



This relationship between racial attitudes and birtherism corresponds to existing research that indicates the importances of such attitudes across a range of issues during the Obama years. Research has shown that racial attitudes strongly influence voting behavior (Kinder and Dale-Riddle, Niemi et al, Tesler), policy (Tesler), and support for the Tea Party (Parker and Barreto).

These analyses of birtherism are, however, only somewhat suggestive since race, party identification, and racial resentment are correlated with one another. For example, not only are most Republicans white, but racial resentment is higher

among whites and Republicans than among non-whites and Democrats. To better understand how these variables might interact with one another, I conducted a multivariate analysis of the data. Using belief in birtherism as the dependent variable, I ran an initial logit model controlling for whether a respondent was White or not, party identification, and racial resentment. In addition, I have included controls for ideology, age, family income, education, and gender. The results are below:

Table 5:

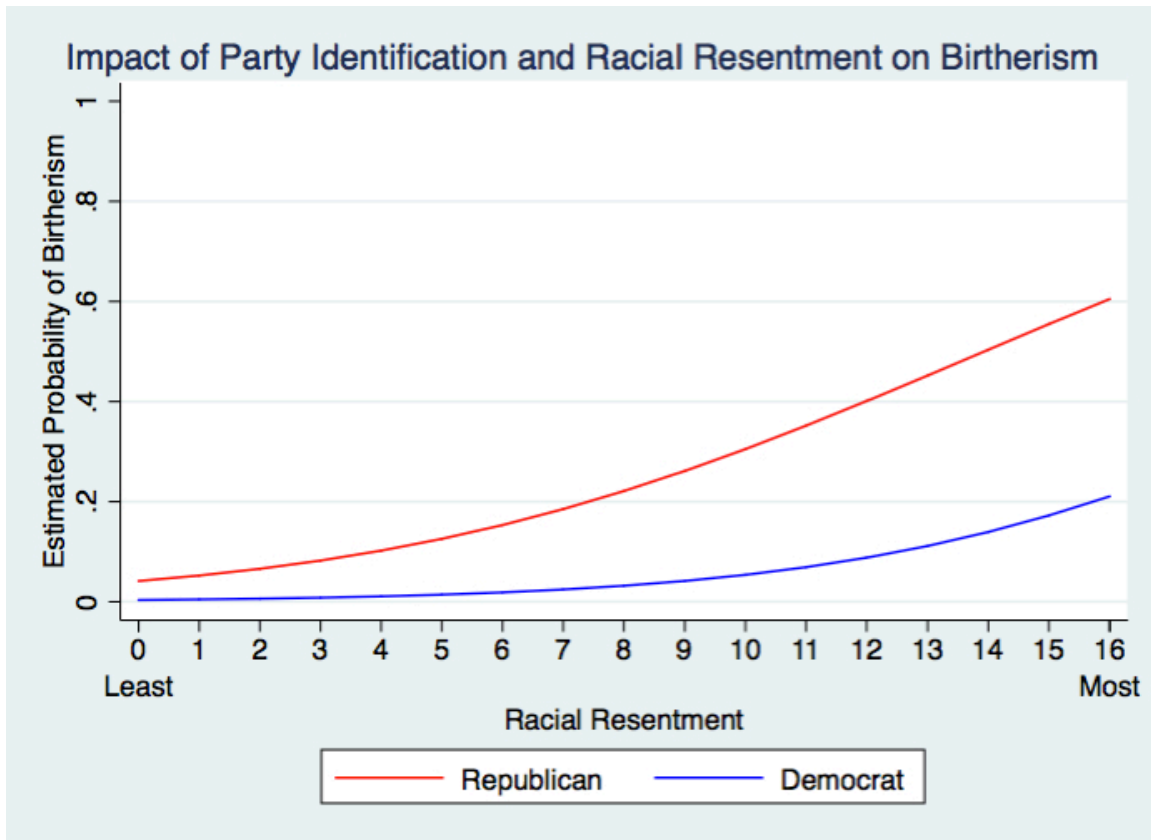
	Birther
Party Identification	0.435 (4.78)**
White	1.281 (2.76)**
Racial Resentment	0.254 (5.19)**
Ideology	0.312 (2.15)*
Age	0.009 (0.90)
Income	0.088 (1.74)
Education	-0.296 (2.46)*
Gender	-0.250 (0.81)
Constant	-8.155 (7.14)**
<i>N</i>	793

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

The table indicates that party identification, racial resentment, and whether one is white or not are positively correlated with birtherism and are statistically significant.

To better understand the relationship between party identification, racial resentment, and birtherism, I reran the above model but used a dummy variable for party identification (1=Democrat, 0=Republican) and I also included an interaction term for party and racial resentment. The graph below shows the predicted probability of birtherism for Democrats and Republicans at each level of racial resentment. Among those with the lowest levels of racial resentment, party had little influence as both Democrats and Republicans had a low probability of believing in birtherism. As racial resentment increased, however, the probability of birtherism increased for both Democrats and Republicans, but more among the latter. Among those with the highest levels of racial resentment, an estimated 60 percent of Republicans had birther beliefs compared to only 20 percent of Democrats.

Graph 6:



In fact, this graph understates the impact of racial resentment since we know from Graph 5 that there are no birthers in racial resentment categories 0-6.

Birtherism: Ignorance or Information?

While racial conservatives and partisan Republicans provide fertile ground for birther beliefs, it is also clear that those beliefs are influenced by their levels of education. The results from the logit model in Table 5 show that education is statistically and negatively correlated with birtherism, indicating that those with higher levels of education are less likely to believe in birtherism. On the other hand,

birtherism is not just the result of ignorance. If simple ignorance were the primary reason for birtherism, levels of birtherism should not have increased again after the release of President Obama's birth certificate. Instead, they rose and as mentioned previously, they are as high as ever. Furthermore, those Graphs also show that birtherism is strongly influenced by the information environment. In particular, when public figures made statements questioning President Obama's birth certificate, levels of birtherism increased. Thus, one should expect birtherism to be strongest among the most attentive public since they are the ones most likely to be exposed to birther claims.

To test for this, I ran a revised version of the logit model in Table 6, this time including a variable for how much attention respondents said they gave to the news.

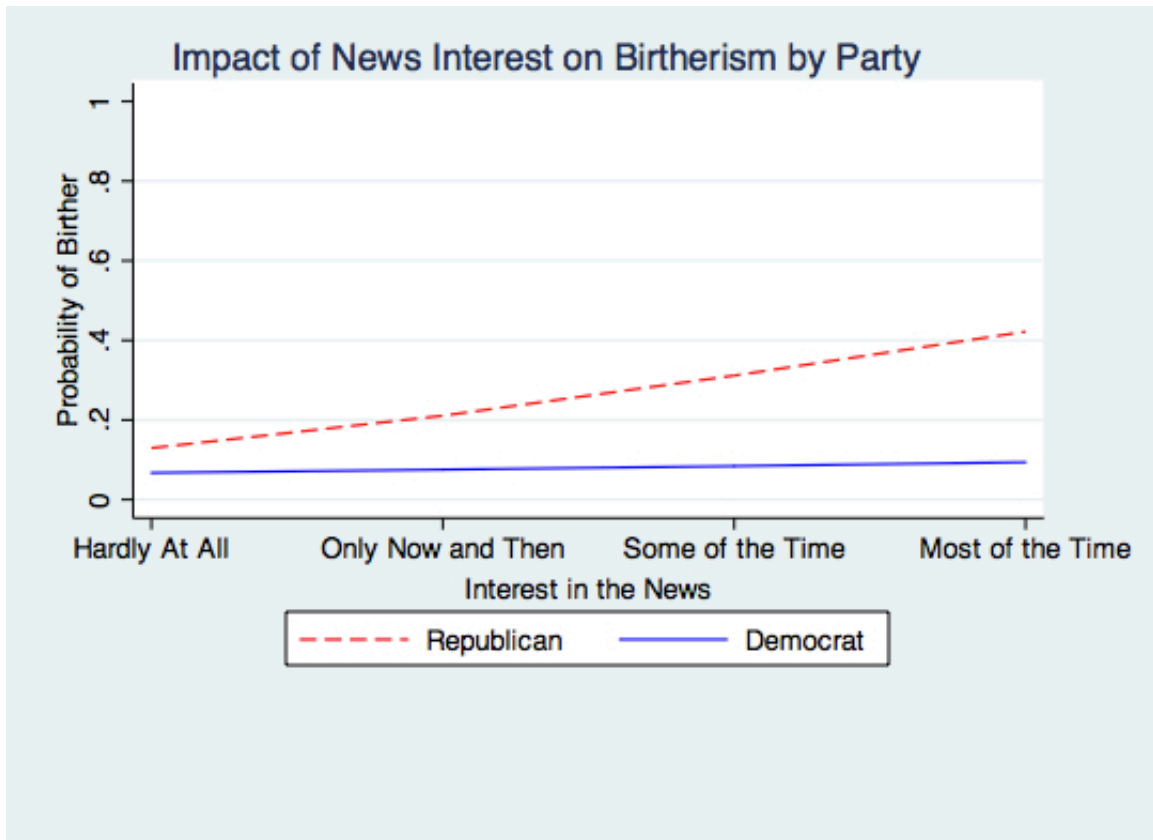
Table 6:

	Birther
Party Identification	0.417 (4.52)**
Racial Resentment	0.259 (5.24)**
White	1.256 (2.77)**
Ideology	0.263 (1.82)
Age	0.000 (0.04)
Income	0.068 (1.32)
Education	-0.334 (2.80)**
Gender	-0.191 (0.63)
Interest in the News	0.493 (2.76)**
Constant	-8.887 (7.66)**
<i>N</i>	782

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

As expected, those who pay the most attention to the news are more likely to be birthers than those who do not. In addition, this effect was limited to Republicans. To demonstrate this, I reran the model above, this time using a dummy variable for party and an interaction term for party and news interest. In Graph 7 below, the predicted probability of birtherism among Democrats hardly varied with news interest. On the other hand, birtherism increased with news interest among Republicans.

Graph 7:



Implications of Birtherism:

Birtherism is not just a proxy for other factors such as ideology or partisanship or racial resentment. Those who identify as birthers are distinctive in their political attitudes and behavior, even when controlling for other factors. For example, Table 7 shows that birthers significantly less likely to vote for Barack Obama in 2012, even when controlling for other factors.

Table 7:

	Obama Vote
Birther	-2.253 (3.11)**
Party ID	-1.150 (5.69)**
Racial Resentment	-0.305 (3.56)**
White	-0.819 (1.33)
Ideology	-0.496 (2.77)**
Age	-0.045 (2.57)*
Income	0.036 (0.35)
Education	-0.289 (1.37)
Gender	-0.251 (0.42)
Constant	14.561 (6.98)**
<i>N</i>	694

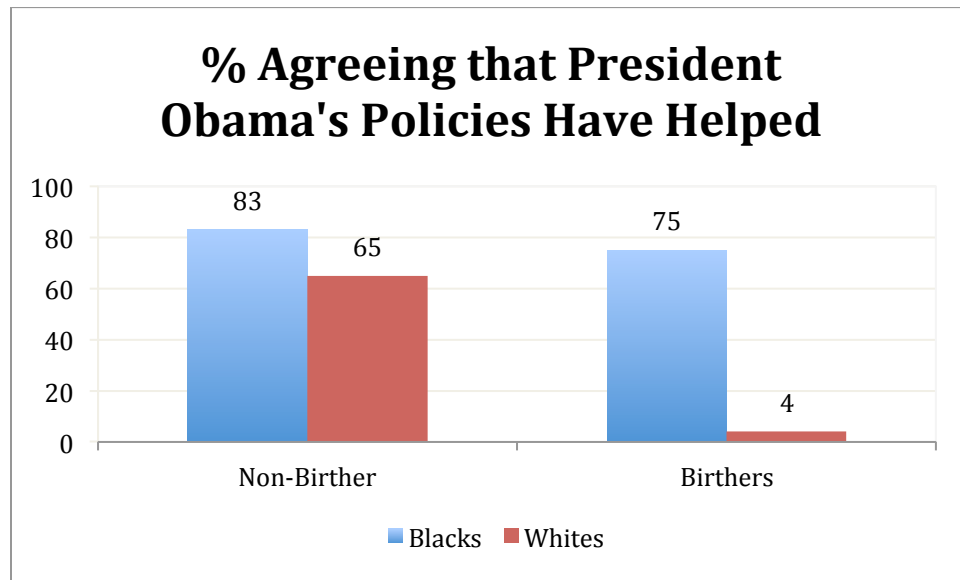
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Based on this model and holding the other variables at their means suggests that birthers were nearly 50 points less likely to vote for Barack Obama compared to non-birthers (38 percent versus 85 percent).

Graph 8 shows that birthers also interpreted President Obama's policies in highly racialized terms. When asked whether they believed that President Obama's policies had helped or hurt various groups, large majorities of non-birthers believed that both blacks and whites had been helped by President Obama's policies. On the

other hand, birthers overwhelmingly perceived that Obama's policies had helped blacks but not whites.

Graph 8:



Conclusion:

In this paper I have tried to examine the development and content of birtherism. These results indicate that birtherism is a function of both partisanship and racial resentment, that it is a product of information (albeit false information) rather than ignorance. Moreover, birtherism is not just a particular manifestation of Republican partisanship, conservative ideology, or even racial resentment. Birtherism exhibits an independent effect on vote choice and how respondents interpret the beneficiaries of President Obama's policies. Thus, birtherism might be best described as a rabbit hole. Those with certain preexisting beliefs (partisanship, racial resentment, etc.) are

predisposed to go down the rabbit hole of birtherism, but once having done so and entered the world of birtherism, where the president is constitutionally illegitimate and effectively perpetrating a fraud upon the American people, it further shapes their understanding and interpretation of American politics.

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- ¹ Jonathan Alter, *The Center Holds: Obama and His Enemies* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013) and Smith and Tau
- ² Wesley Pruden, "An Imposter in the White House?" *Washington Times*, December 5, 2008, p. A04.
- ³ Hulse http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/28/us/politics/28mccain.html?_r=0).
- ⁴ Chin <http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract-id=1157621> and Solum <http://www.michiganlawreview.org/assets/fi/107/solum.pdf>
- ⁵ <http://legaltimes.typepad.com/blt/2008/09/judge-rules-mcc.html>
- ⁶ <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jul/22/entertainment/et-onthemedi22>
- ⁷ <http://tpmdc.talkingpointsmemo.com/2010/07/-heres-tpms-roundup-of.php> and "Rove, Palin Call 'Birthers' a Distraction," UPI Newswire, February 18, 2011.
- ⁸ Alexander Mooney, "Trump Sends Investigators to Hawaii to Look Into Obama," CNN Political Ticker, April 7, 2011. <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/07/trump-sends-investigators-to-hawaii-to-look-into-obama/>
- ⁹ <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/12/cnn-poll-trump-tied-for-first-in-gop-horserace/>
- ¹⁰ Alter, p. 40.
- ¹¹ <http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2013/06/17/2169751/jeff-duncan-birther/>
- ¹² http://surveys.ap.org/data/KnowledgeNetworks/AP_Election_Wave7_Topline_091508.pdf
- ¹³ http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/cbs3h7scpm/econTabReport.pdf
- ¹⁴ Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions." *Political Behavior* 32: 303-330.
- ¹⁵ <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/onpolitics/post/2011/09/constitution-knowledge-sandra-day-oconnor-tea-party-/1#.UbeEOct4ZKo>
- ¹⁶ For a fuller discussion of the validity of racial resentment measures, see Tesler and Sears.
- and Sears (2010) and Sears and Henry (2005).