

# Kamala

## What the Pronunciation of a Single Name Could Mean

*Lydia Mercado*

*This article investigates the correlation between the pronunciation of Kamala and a speaker's political leanings. Participants completed an online survey responding to a variety of pronunciations of Kamala; participants were asked to identify their own pronunciation and their perceived correctness of the pronunciations. The results indicate that there is a significant correlation between political affiliation and the pronunciation of Kamala, both in the pronunciation of the name and the ability to recognize the correct pronunciation. This data supports the merit of analyzing political association as a sociolinguistic variable.*

Names can be a powerful source of identity for individuals, particularly for minority groups within the United States. For example, a study conducted among first-generation Ethiopian immigrant parents found that certain names were given in order to embrace heritage and religion (Grima, 2020). A similar study conducted among biracial couples in Canada reported similar significance to giving an ethnic name to their children: it was a way of connecting children to their heritage (Cila & Lalonde, 2019). While the results of both studies stressed the importance of heritage in choosing names, the results also showed that parents expressed their fear and frustrations with the incorrect pronunciation of given ethnic names.

Mispronunciation of foreign names is nothing new. Lipski (1976) explored some of the possible reasons for the mispronunciation of names, among these being 1) lack of awareness, 2) phonological ability, 3) laziness, and 4) deliberate mispronunciation as ridicule. Lack of awareness may be remedied by proximity; once people have heard names pronounced correctly, they can better attempt accurate pronunciation. This was found to be true in the pronunciation of Sanchez on the University of Texas campus (Shield, 2003). Following the campaign of a notable politician, Tony Sanchez, more people were able to use a Spanish [a] in place of the anglicized [æ].

While there may be a large range of factors contributing to the pronunciation of an individual name, one potential cause with limited research is that of political persuasion. In the United States, the two major political parties are the Democratic and Republican parties, the platforms of which cover a large variety of topics and issues. The modern Democratic party is much more racially diverse, and as such, reflects racially diverse interests. In a Pew Research study, it was found that as of 2016, the profile of Democratic voters were divided as such: “Fifty-seven percent are White, twenty-one percent are Black, twelve percent are Hispanic, three percent are Asian, and five percent describe themselves as mixed race or describe their race as ‘other’”; the same study found that the Republican voters were eighty-six percent White, six percent Hispanic, and two percent Black (The Parties on the Eve, 2016). Another Pew Research study found that Democratic counties had more than twice as many immigrant residents as opposed to Republican counties (seventeen percent as opposed to seven percent). Reflective of these statistics, Democratic counties were found to be more pro-immigration (Doherty, 2006). These

associations and sentiments would be reflected in pronunciation. For example, the pronunciation of *Iraq* was found to be indicative of political persuasion among members of Congress (Hall-Lew et al., 2010). Republicans were more likely to vocalize the second vowel as /æ/, while Democrats were more likely to use /a:/.

Pronunciation being a potential indicator of political leanings is significant for several reasons. If a single word can reveal biases, individuals could better understand those with whom they interact. This could be beneficial especially when interacting with authority figures who do not share the same ideology; a single word could allow someone to recognize bias and act accordingly.

Pronouncing someone's name correctly is also a form of respect. For someone like Kamala Harris, whose name pronunciation is so readily available to learn, it should be possible for most people to learn the correct pronunciation. While the vice president may not be listening, people belonging to minority groups can see the effort, or lack thereof, that others make to respect her name and the cultural identity that comes with it.

One study examined the mispronunciation of cultural names as racial microaggressions, with a focus on the K-12 classroom context (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). The authors explained that although anyone's name can be mispronounced, "the fact that this experience occurs within a context of historical and continued racism is what makes the negative impact of [consistent mispronunciation] so powerful for Students of Color" (p. 444). Such microaggressions, while often unintentional, can contribute to insecurity of identity and feelings of otherness.

There is also the matter of political persuasion becoming a social variable for sociolinguistic analysis. After their findings about *Iraq*, Hall-Lew et al. (2010) questioned, "Is political persuasion a different kind of social variable than those traditionally considered in sociolinguistics, such as age, gender, socioeconomic class, or ethnicity?" (p. 98). It would be remarkable that such a flexible variable could have a significant impact on language. After all, a person's political ideology is a non-fixed variable, with one's opinions and the political parties' platforms subject to change. Could such ideological changes be reflected in speech as well?

# The Present Study

This study seeks to examine if a similar association exists with respect to the pronunciation of Vice President Kamala Harris's name: Does the pronunciation of *Kamala* indicate political leanings? Vice President Kamala Harris has often taught an audience how to pronounce her name. In 2016, she released a campaign video for the US Senate, clarifying that “it’s not *CAM-el-UH*, it’s not *kuh-MAHL-uh*, it’s not *karmel-UH*, it’s *Kamala*” (Harris, 2016). On many occasions she has explained, “Just think of, like, a *comma*, and add a *la*,” the pronunciation of which is phonetically transcribed [kamələ]. Her name does have a significance to her Indian culture, meaning “lotus flower” (KGO-TV, 2021). Despite the value of a name and persistent efforts to clarify pronunciation, the now household name of *Kamala* continues to be pronounced in a variety of ways. This article will examine if those with liberal-leaning political ideologies are more likely to pronounce her name correctly. Among general political associations, additional attention will be given to the issue of racial injustice.

This study conducted a survey in which participants were asked to listen to various pronunciations of *Kamala* and indicate how often they used each pronunciation, as well as their personal perception of how correct each pronunciation was. Then participants were asked to self-identify their American political party, as well as how important they consider the issue of racial injustice in the United States today. In pursuit of the overall research question, the following questions were also given to the participants: Is the use of the correct pronunciation of *Kamala* more strongly associated with the Democratic party than the Republican party? Is knowledge of the correct pronunciation of *Kamala* more strongly associated with the Democratic party than the Republican party? Is knowledge of the correct pronunciation strongly associated with its usage, and does this differ between party preferences?

## Methodology

The survey was administered online and began with a screener question, followed by four sections of questions. After each section was recorded, participants were unable to go back to edit their responses. The initial question asked participants to identify the current vice president of the United States. Then, the first section of the survey consisted of demographic questions (age, race, education level, etc.). The second section provided five

audio recordings with different *Kamala* pronunciations, which were recorded by the researcher. These pronunciations included the following: [kamalə], [kamələ], [kamalə] (with heavy stress on second syllable), [kæmelə], and [kəmelə]. For each audio recording, participants were asked to self-identify their use of that pronunciation of *Kamala Harris* on a scale of “always” to “never.” After, participants advanced to the third section, where they were given the same audio recordings, this time accompanied by the question of how correct they considered the pronunciation to be on a scale of “completely correct” to “not correct at all.” (The order of the audio clips was randomized for both sections two and three.) The fourth section asked questions about political self-identification, both by party (i.e., Republican, Democrat, or Independent) and on a seven-point political scale ranging from extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7). The last question asked if they considered racial injustice an important issue in the United States today.

The participants of the survey came from associates of the researcher, the survey having been shared on social media (Facebook and Instagram) as well as on Learning Suite. This resulted in significant populations from Arizona, Idaho, and Utah. The survey received 125 responses. Responses were only analyzed if they fit the requirements of 1) writing something similar to “Kamala Harris” for the vice president question and 2) having English as a native language. With these restrictions, there were 109 analyzed responses.

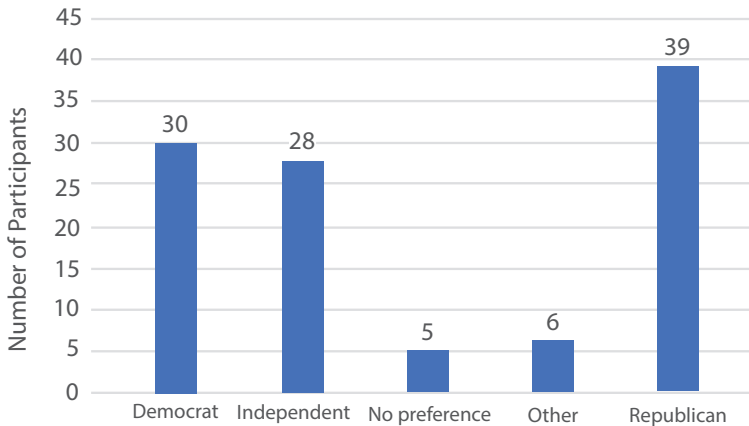
The data was analyzed with a few tests, using the software Jamovi. Usage and perceived correctness and knowledge of only the correct pronunciation of *Kamala* was analyzed. Chi-square goodness of fit tests were run to find if the distribution of usage and perceived correctness were significant. Additionally, a chi-square test of independence was run to see if political party affiliation was associated with correct pronunciation usage and perceived correctness. These categorical pronunciation variables were processed based upon direct survey responses and were also simplified. For simplification, usage was divided between “yes” (always and often use this pronunciation) and “no” (sometimes, rarely, and never use this pronunciation). To simplify perceived correctness, knowledge of pronunciation was divided into “yes” (completely correct and almost correct) and “no” (somewhat correct, slightly correct, and not correct at all). Additionally, a correlation matrix and linear regression were also

run. Point values were assigned for each answer about usage and perceived correctness, on a scale of one to five, one being “always” and five being “never” for the former, and one being “completely correct” and five being “not correct at all” for the latter. Participants were also asked to identify themselves on a political scale, with one being “extremely liberal (left)” and seven being “extremely conservative (right).”

## Results

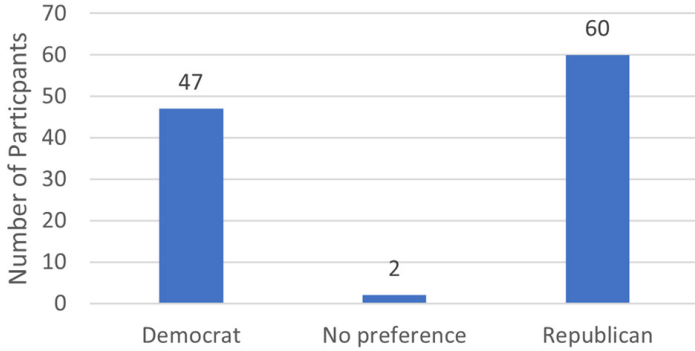
The survey resulted in politically diverse demographics, with thirty Democrats, thirty-nine Republicans, twenty-eight Independents, and eleven who consider themselves other or have no preference (see figure 1). The survey asked those who identified as other than Democrats or Republicans which party they would more likely associate themselves with in order to simplify the data. This resulted in forty-seven people associated with the Democratic Party, sixty people associated with the Republican Party, and still two who chose not to identify with either (see figure 2). The majority of the statistical analyses were run with this simplified data.

**Figure 1**  
*Political Party*



**Figure 2**

*Political Leaning/Association*

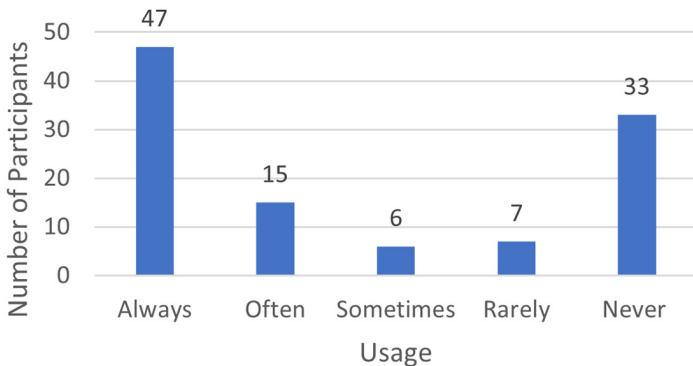


There was also a variety of responses as far as usage of the correct pronunciation. The majority were on either end of the spectrum with forty-seven participants always using the correct pronunciation and thirty-three participants never using it (see figure 3).

As far as perceived correction is concerned, many people were able to accurately identify the right pronunciation as correct. Forty-eight participants identified it as completely correct, twenty-two participants as almost correct, sixteen participants

**Figure 3**

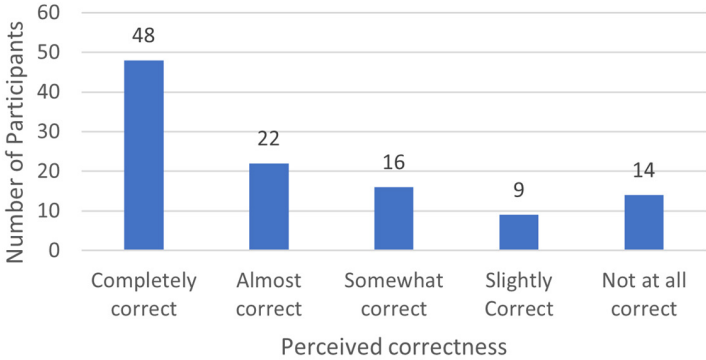
*Correct Pronunciation Usage*



as somewhat correct, nine participants as slightly correct, and fourteen participants as not correct at all (see figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Perceived Correctness of the Correct Pronunciation*



Chi-square goodness of fit tests were run on both correct pronunciation (CP) usage and CP perceived correctness. The chi-square goodness of fit test showed the results of the CP usage and the perceived correctness to be statistically significant (see tables A1 and A2 in the appendix).

A chi-square test of independence was also run in order to analyze the associations between political leaning, CP, and CP perception. When using the variety of selections for correct pronunciation, the test of independence found the association between political leaning and CP to be statistically significant with a small effect size.

The chi-square test of independence between political leaning and knowledge (perception) of correct pronunciation found the association to not be statistically significant (see table C1 in the appendix). When the test was run again with the simplified categories of knowing the correct pronunciation or not, the results suggested that the association was statistically significant with a small effect size.

Finally, a chi-square test of association was run between knowing the correct pronunciation and using the correct pronunciation. This showed a similar statistically significant association with a medium effect size (see table D1 in the appendix). Additionally, the data was divided by party, and a chi-square test of association was run between knowing the correct pronunciation and using the correct pronunciation. For the Republican data,



this was found to be statistically significant with a medium effect size (see table D2 in the appendix). For the Democratic data, the association was also found to be statistically significant with a medium-large effect size (see table D3 in the appendix).

Treating the survey results as a continuous scale, a correlation matrix was created for the variables of political scale (one, extremely liberal; seven, extremely conservative), perceived correctness of pronunciation (one, completely correct; five, not correct at all), use of correct pronunciation (one, always; five, never), and the importance of the issue of racial injustice (one, yes—definitely important; five, no—definitely not important). As shown in table 1 and suggested by the chi-square tests independence, there was a significant correlation between political scale and perceived pronunciation correctness; political scale and correct pronunciation usage; and perceived pronunciation correctness and correct pronunciation usage. The Pearson correlation between political scale and perceived correctness was  $r = 0.286$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $r^2 = 0.082$ . This indicates that there is a significant relationship between these two variables and that 8.2

**Table 1**  
*Correlation Matrix*

		Racial Injustice issue	Political scale	CP-PC	CPU
Racial Injustice issue	Pearson's r	—			
	p-value	—			
	N	—			
Political Scale	Pearson's r	0.427***	—		
	p-value	<.001	—		
	N	105	—		
CP perceived correctness (CP-PC)	Pearson's r	0.164	0.286**	—	
	p-value	0.089	0.003	—	
	N	108	106	—	
CP - Use (CPU)	Pearson's r	0.181	0.290**	0.721***	—
	p-value	0.062	0.003	<.001	—
	N	107	105	108	—

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

percent of variance observed in the perceived correctness of the correct pronunciation could be accounted for by political leaning. The Pearson correlation between political scale and correct usage was  $r = 0.290$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $r^2 = 0.084$ . This indicates that there is a significant relationship between these two variables and that 8.4 percent of variance observed in the usage of the correct pronunciation could be accounted for by political leaning. Additionally, the correlation between the importance of racial injustice and political scale was found to be significant. While that association existed, the correlation between importance of racial injustice and pronunciation (knowledge and use) was not found to be significant.

## Discussion

Overall, the completed studies support the hypothesis that the pronunciation of *Kamala* can be indicative of political associations. The data suggests this is true for both the person's usage of correct pronunciation, as well as their knowledge and perception of what the correct usage is. The chi-square goodness of fit tests indicate that the results of both correct pronunciation usage and perceived correctness are statistically significant. Chi-square tests of independence found that political leaning and correct pronunciation usage were associated. The chi-square test of independence between political leaning and knowledge of correct pronunciation when using simplified data found the association to be significant. This indicates that Democrats are more likely to use the correct pronunciation of *Kamala*, as well as know what the correct pronunciation is. Additionally, the association between usage and perceived correctness was found to be statistically significant, although the effect size was seen to be larger among Democrats than Republicans. This indicates that if a person knows the correct pronunciation of *Kamala*, they will likely use it; however, this association is stronger among Democrats than Republicans. The correlation matrix also indicated an association between political association and pronunciation usage and knowledge, with 8.4 percent of the variance in usage and 8.2 percent of the variance in knowledge being accounted for by political ideology.

The author did not find previous research on this specific topic of the pronunciation of *Kamala Harris*. However, the implication of this study that pronunciation of non-English words and names can be indicative of political associations has been suggested,

most noticeably in the Hall-Lew, Coppock, and Starr studies. The findings of this study further support their conclusions.

## Conclusion

The findings support the idea that the pronunciation of *Kamala* is indicative of political party association, both in the usage of the correct pronunciation and its correct identification; Democrats are more likely to use and know the correct pronunciation. Also indicated was the association with identifying the pronunciation and use of that pronunciation, although the effect size was slightly less among Republicans. As previously discussed, listening to someone's pronunciation of this single name could reveal political associations and related biases. These results could indicate the potential need for political association as a demographic variable in sociolinguistic research.

This study was limited in many capacities. The survey was administered in a manner that relied heavily on self-identification; this applied to both identification of the pronunciation the participant used as well as political self-identification. The prior variable would be more concerning since people often change their vocalization behavior as they think about it. In place of an online survey, it would be best to record participant pronunciation organically, perhaps by having them read a paragraph or having an interview where they discuss the current presidential administration. The population was also sampled from associates of the researcher, which could be problematic, had any of the participants considered how they had previously heard the researcher's pronunciation. A better sample might be completely randomized.

Additionally, there is a problem where some participants may have never used the name *Kamala* in their speech, or not often. It may be useful to take a sample from public political figures, whether that be congressmen or political news reports. These more official participants would have the benefit of having their political preferences on public record, as well as audio recordings already available for analysis. The position of Kamala Harris herself could also be affecting the data, as she is a prominent figure of the Democratic party, which could influence speakers' respect for her, and thus pronunciation. Future studies could also analyze pronunciation of other names or words to find where else this association between political ideology and pronunciation exists.

# References

- Cila, Jordia & Lalonde Richard N. (2019). What's in a name? Motivations for baby-naming in multicultural contexts. In Ali H. Ali-Hoorie & Peter D. MacIntyre (Eds.), *Contemporary language motivation theory: 60 years since Garden and Lambert (1959)*. (pp. 130–152). Multilingual Matters.
- Doherty, Carroll. (2009). Attitudes Toward Immigration in Red and Blue. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/2006/05/09/attitudes-toward-immigration-in-red-and-blue/>
- Girma, Hewan. (2020). Black names, immigrant names: Navigating race and ethnicity through personal names. *Journal of Black Studies*, 51(1), 16–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934719888806>
- Hall-Lew, Lauren, Coppock, Elizabeth & Starr, Rebecca L. (2010). Indexing Political Persuasion: Variation in the Iraq Vowels. *American Speech*, 85(1): 91–102. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-2010-004>
- Harris, Kamala [@KamalaHarris]. (2016, May 24). *People pronounce my name many different ways. Let #KidsForKamala show you how it's done.* [Tweet]. Twitter.
- Lipski, John M. (1976). Prejudice and pronunciation. *American Speech*, 51(1), 109–118. <https://doi.org/10.2307/455361>
- KGO-TV. (2021, January 19). *How to pronounce Kamala Harris' name and what it means.* ABC7 News. <https://abc7news.com/pronounce-kamala-name-pronunciation-harris-meaning/7611611/>
- Kohli, Rita, & Solórzano, Daniel G. (2012). Teachers, please learn our names!: Racial microaggressions and the K-12 classroom. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 15(4), 441–462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.674026>
- Olson, Linda L., & Samuels, S. Jay. (1973). The relationship between age and accuracy of foreign language pronunciation. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 66(6), 263–268. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.erl.lib.byu.edu/stable/27536436>

The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart. (2016). *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/09/13/the-parties-on-the-eve-of-the-2016-election-two-coalitions-moving-further-apart/>

Shield, Aaron. (2003). The 64 million dollar vowel: Anglo pronunciation of a Spanish last name in Texas. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics*, 9(2), 149–158.

# Appendix

**Table A1**

*Goodness of Fit Test—Correct Pronunciation Usage*

Proportions - CP - Use

Level	Count	Proportion
Never	33	0.3056
Rarely	7	0.0648
Sometimes	6	0.0556
Often	15	0.1389
Always	47	0.4352

$\chi^2$  Goodness Fit Test

$\chi^2$	df	p
59.0	4	<.001

**Table A2**

*Goodness of Fit Test—Perceived Correctness*

Proportions - CP - Perceived correctness

Level	Count	Proportion
Not correct at all	14	0.1284
Somewhat correct	16	0.1468
Slightly correct	9	0.0826
Almost correct	22	0.2018
Completely correct	48	0.4404

$\chi^2$  Goodness Fit Test

$\chi^2$	df	p
43.3	4	<.001

**Table B1**

*Test of Independence—Political Leaning and Correct Pronunciation Use*

Contingency Tables

<b>Political Leaning</b>				
<b>CP - Use</b>	<b>Republican</b>	<b>Democrat</b>	<b>No Preference</b>	<b>Total</b>
Never	26	6	1	33
Rarely	6	1	0	7
Sometimes	2	4	0	6
Often	6	9	0	15
Always	19	27	1	47
Total	59	47	2	108

$\chi^2$  Tests

Nominal

	<b>Values</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>		<b>Values</b>
$\chi^2$	18.4	8	0.019	Phi-coefficient	NaN
N	108			Cramer's V	0.292

**Table B2**

*Test of Association—Correct Pronunciation Knowledge and Use*

Contingency Tables

		Know correct pronunciation		
Use correct pronunciation		Yes	No	Total
	No	15	32	47
	Yes	55	6	61
	Total	70	38	108

$\chi^2$ Tests				Nominal	
	Values	df	p		Values
$\chi^2$	39.5	1	< .001	Phi-coefficient	0.605
N	108			Cramer's V	0.605



**Table C1**

*Test of Independence—Political Leaning and Knowledge of Correct Pronunciation*

Contingency Tables

Political Leaning				
CP - Use	Republican	Democrat	No Preference	Total
Never	26	6	1	33
Rarely	6	1	0	7
Sometimes	2	4	0	6
Often	6	9	0	15
Always	19	27	1	47
Total	59	47	2	108

$\chi^2$  Tests

Nominal

	Values	df	p		Values
$\chi^2$	18.4	8	0.019	Phi-coefficient	NaN
N	108			Cramer's V	0.292

**Table C2***Test of Independence—Political Leaning and Correct Pronunciation Use (Simplified)*

## Contingency Tables

Political Leaning	Use correct pronunciation		
	Yes	No	Total
Republican	35	24	59
Democrat	55	36	47
No preference	1	1	2
Total	47	61	108

 $\chi^2$  Tests

## Nominal

	Values	df	p		Values
$\chi^2$	39.5	1	< .001	Contingency coefficient	0.366
N	108			Phi-coefficient	NaN
				Cramer's V	0.357

**Table D1***Test of Independence—Political Leaning and Knowledge of Correct Pronunciation (Simplified)*

## Contingency Tables

Political Leaning	Use correct pronunciation		
	Yes	No	Total
Republican	31	29	60
Democrat	38	9	47
No preference	1	1	2
Total	70	39	109

 $\chi^2$  Tests

## Nominal

	Values	df	p		Values
$\chi^2$	9.95	2	0.007	Phi-coefficient	NaN
N	109			Cramer's V	0.302

**Table D2***Republicans—Test of Independence*

Contingency Tables

Usage	Know correct pronunciation		
	Yes	No	Total
No	11	24	35
Yes	20	4	24
Total	31	28	59

 $\chi^2$  Tests

Nominal

	Values	df	p		Values
$\chi^2$	15.4	1	< .001	Phi-coefficient	0.511
N	59			Cramer's V	0.511

**Table D3***Democrats—Test of Independence*

Contingency Tables

Usage	Know correct pronunciation		
	Yes	No	Total
No	3	7	10
Yes	35	2	27
Total	38	9	47

 $\chi^2$  Tests

Nominal

	Values	df	p		Values
$\chi^2$	21.2	1	< .001	Phi-coefficient	0.672
N	47			Cramer's V	0.672