

Nonattitudes

Concern over attitude responses

- # Substantial numbers of people will say they don't have opinions on issue questions
- # Widespread ignorance about basic political information
 - E.g., more than 40 percent can't identify their governor's political party
- # Opinions are unstable over time
 - Up to ½ of a sample will express substantially different opinions at two time points
- # Respondents will make up opinions on fictional or totally obscure issues
- # Responses susceptible to context effects
 - Effects of preceding items
 - Effects of question wording

Filtering for non-attitudes

Tradeoff

- Encourage people who “lean” one direction or another to express their opinion
- Discourage people who truly have no opinion from expressing a “nonattitude”

No filter: only accept “don’t know” when it is volunteered

Initial don’t know filters

- Do you agree or disagree with this ... or do you not have an opinion?
- Have you been interested enough in this to favor one side over the other?

The meaning of “don’t know”

- # Does “don’t know” mean hesitation, uncertainty, ambivalence, or genuinely no opinion?
- # Schuman and Presser experiments
 - Inclusion of explicit “don’t know” filter significantly increases proportion of don’t know response (about 14 – 23%)
 - While less educated people are more likely to give don’t know responses, they are not more susceptible to form effects.
- # Bishop experiments
 - Less educated more likely to provide attitudes on fictitious issues.
 - “Nonattitudes”, or “imputed attitudes”?

Does including a “don’t know” filter affect distribution of responses? (Schuman & Presser experiments)

- # Across many items, distribution of substantive opinions is not changed drastically by including a filter
- # One exception: opinions on the intentions of “Russia” and “Arab countries”
 - Stronger relationship between opinions on these items using the standard question form
 - Speculation that general optimism vs. pessimism affected responses to these questions

“Floaters”

- # Floaters are those who will offer an opinion when no “don’t know” option appears, but will not offer an opinion when there is a “don’t know” filter
- # Trait model: a distinct group of people will say “don’t know” when that option is offered on any question, but will give an opinion when the option does not appear
- # Threshold model: on any given question, some people have a weak opinion, and will offer that opinion only when the “don’t know” option does not appear

Perspectives on nonattitudes

- # Converse: any survey item will have produced a significant number of *apparent* attitudes with no thought or meaning behind them
- # Zaller: any survey item will produce a significant number of responses that are strongly influenced by survey context or media priming
- # Shuman and Presser: any survey item will produce responses that are largely affected by interpretations of the item and long-standing predispositions