How We Do Things with Surveys:

Recognizing Polls as 'Speech Acts' Will Improve the Science of Public Opinion

Abstract: Most public opinion researchers implicitly treat surveys as mechanical measurement tools. Even sophisticated accounts recognizing that responses are constructed, rather than retrieved, still treat respondents as automatic systems rather than social agents. In contrast, we argue that surveys are fundamentally conversations — asymmetric and stylized, but conversations nonetheless. We propose a *speech act perspective* on surveys that highlights how researchers and respondents use words not just to describe the world but to change it. This perspective illuminates how the parties to the conversation use their limited survey vocabulary to express identities, signal group membership, do science, police social norms, resist manipulation, and perform democratic citizenship. Rather than undermining survey research, recognizing these actions enables us to synthesize diverse phenomena — from partisan cheerleading to survey trolling — under a unified theoretical framework. We demonstrate how this perspective transforms apparent measurement problems into meaningful political behaviors and outline concrete methodological innovations for studying public opinion and strengthening its function in democratic life.

Introduction

Traffic police do not need to understand the physics behind radar guns to measure a vehicle's speed: point, press the button, and note the number on the screen. Drivers cannot alter the measurement by wanting to appear law-abiding, and the device does not return a different number for drivers speeding to the emergency room and those trying to win a drag race. It just measures speed.

We often treat surveys like radar guns for the mind. Ask respondents good questions; tally their beliefs, attitudes, and preferences; and report public opinion. If respondents answer with something different from what we intend — for example, if more people claim to have voted than is possible based on the observed turnout rate — the device has malfunctioned. In this picture, the science of survey research hinges entirely on minimizing such measurement errors. We offer incentives for accuracy. We pre-test. We randomize question order. We search for just the right words to extract the correct objects from the respondent's mind.

Such techniques are typically necessary to measure public opinion, but they are rarely sufficient. Opinion surveys are not like radar guns, and people are not like the cars they drive. We would do better to think of surveys as a constrained type of conversation. Researchers must decide not just the questions they will ask, but what they intend to (or might

accidentally) *do* with the answers or merely by asking. Respondents must decide not just what they believe, but what the questions mean, why the researchers want to know, and what messages different answers would send. In one sense, these points are familiar (Schober and Conrad 1997; Perrin and McFarland 2011), and yet we have still not come to terms with their full implications. Our models and metaphors direct our attention and limit our vision. As the saying goes, the map is not the territory. We would add that different kinds of territory require different kinds of maps for different purposes. We often use the wrong maps for public opinion polls, which leads us astray in both science and politics.

Researchers have identified a litany of anomalies in survey research and have filled a toolbox with techniques to address them. But those anomalies appear less anomalous and disparate when we treat asking and answering survey questions as two-way interactions rather than merely passive measurement. Researchers *do* things with surveys, intentionally and unintentionally, and respondents do things with their answers. Researchers engage or annoy respondents, predict elections, interrupt dinner conversations, support policy making, make campaign decisions, influence public discourse, etc. Respondents express identities, police social norms, resist manipulation, reveal private truths (or not), and fulfill the obligations of citizenship (or not).

We develop a *speech act perspective* on surveys. Drawing on speech act theory — the philosophical tradition that revealed how we use words not only to describe the world but also to change it — we provide a unified account of how respondents use the limited vocabulary of survey responses to achieve various social and political goals. Good measurement requires that we reckon systematically with surveys as communicative interactions rather than just information transfers confounded by noise. Sometimes respondents faithfully report beliefs, but sometimes they cheer for their team, troll putatively biased researchers, express who they are, or stretch the range of publicly acceptable opinions. Furthermore, a speech act perspective helps us see other things we *already* do and *could* do with surveys (beyond measurement).

Far from undermining survey research, by adopting the speech act perspective, we can better account for and manage surveys' inherently social dynamics, synthesize heretofore disparate empirical regularities under a unified framework, and expand our research program to grapple constructively with the public nature of public opinion.

Background

According to the standard theory of the survey response, we write questions to elicit a veridical (i.e., truth-tracking) report of a person's mental

contents. Picture a vending machine: the consumer types in the code corresponding to the desired item (the interviewer's question) and a mechanical arm navigates to the correct location (the response category corresponding to the respondent's belief), pushes the item into a bin and delivers it out the chute (selecting the response option corresponding to the belief).[1] An item might be out of stock ("Don't Know"), the consumer might hit the wrong button (write a bad question), or the machine might glitch (the respondent misunderstands the question or misremembers the true answer). But the machine does not deliver chewing gum instead of chips just because you used a credit card instead of cash.

For some survey applications, the vending machine analogy is apt. We can typically treat constructs such as the respondent's age as matters of fact that few people will misremember or misrepresent. If so, cognitive theories of the survey response, including Tourangeau et al's (2000), work well, since they emphasize retrieval, memory, cognitive load, and comprehension. Even here, however, speech act theory can illuminate elements like comprehension, although only for the semantic consequences of the researchers's pragmatic choices.

[1] The vending machine analogy recalls "file drawer" accounts of the survey response. We prefer the vending machine analogy because it emphasizes the mechanical aspects of a subject's response to a stimulus.

For example, Tourangeau et al. (2000) draw on Grice's notion of implicature (i.e. implying more than what was explicitly stated, regardless of intent) to explain how merely putting two questions near each other ("How happy are you…?" and "How satisfied are you…?") can change the perceived meaning of the latter. The respondent infers that the question-writer must have intended it to differ from the former.

We aim to take a step further by highlighting the theory's core assumption that a response is valid if and only if it represents a veridical report of the mental content the researcher intends to elicit. This assumption only makes sense if there are mental contents to report. Consequently, the theory runs aground quickly when we apply it to political attitudes rather than fact-like constructs such as age. Respondents cannot give us veridical reports about things that do not exist.

Zaller (1992) uses this insight to derive the second component of the standard model of survey responses. He extends the cognitive theory to cover cases (like attitudes) where there is often no determinate referent to be retrieved. He depicts respondents constructing responses on-the-fly, using whichever considerations are available to them at the moment. Zaller's justly famous Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model offers a parsimonious account of how considerations enter long-term memory, and how they make their way back into mass opinion by way of survey responses.

Instead of a vending machine, we can think of Zaller's model as analogous to claw-crane games common in arcades. The types of prizes correspond to a question's response options, with each prize type's proportion in a given respondent's jumble determined by their set of considerations. The researcher navigates the claw into the jumble, hoping to extract a useful indicator of the construct (a "good" prize), but may come up empty (a "Don't Know") or with a cheap piece of junk (a non-attitude or other misleading indicator of the construct). The predictability of the outcome depends on the jumble (how well-structured the respondent's beliefs are) and the player's skill (how good the researcher is at matching questions, constructs, and respondents).

We do not offer the analogies to be glib, but rather to highlight that both models treat respondents as mechanical systems rather than human agents. Users (researchers) *inter*-act with vending machines and arcade games, but the machines (respondents) *re*-act to the users. This point is not a criticism in itself, since respondents sometimes *do* react mechanistically or choose to align their actions with the goals of the interviewer. Our point is that both models cover special cases within the larger class that the speech act perspective reveals. Zaller's can handle less fact-like constructs well, but

like Tourangeau's, still falters on cases where the researcher's pragmatic goals and the respondent's diverge.[2]

While non-attitudes arise when there are no relevant mental contents to report, similar issues arise when respondents have *more* than relevant mental contents to report. Social desirability bias and (at least one variant of) experimenter demand are illustrative in this regard. Here, the standard model envisages a "true" disposition lurking in the mental contents of the respondent, and the problem is how to elicit it. The "social" part of social desirability bias implies that there are social forces at work — normative injunction, for example — in the survey response that lead respondents to misrepresent what comes to mind when a survey question triggers retrieval from memory.

We distinguish two kinds of experimenter demand. First, we can define experimenter demand as participants trying to provide researchers with evidence that supports the researchers' hypotheses. Mummolo and Peterson (2019) convincingly show that this sort of effect is generally minimal. But a second sort of experimenter demand implicitly invokes social norms common in human communication. For example, in within-subjects counterfactual experiments (Coppock and Graham 2021),

[2] In addition, Zaller (1992) concedes that the RAS model should really be the RA(Integrate)S model – i.e., we would expect RAS to work less well when the respondents' considerations exhibit more meaningful structure (280-281).

researchers ask participants to report an attitude and then re-ask them while they imagine a counterfactual scenario (such as if a politician had not made a controversial statement that they did in fact make). This format reduces bias from response substitution that arises in single-shot attitude change questions (e.g., asking a single question about whether the statement makes them more or less likely to support the politician). But one might still object that it could prompt respondents to report how they think they "should" have reacted rather than their "true" counterfactual attitudes.

The standard model struggles with these social norms because it recognizes only one legitimate goal: veridical reporting. We treat everything else as errors to be eliminated. Sometimes this posture makes sense. When people misremember whether they voted, misunderstand what we mean by 'politics,' or click randomly because they are tired, we reasonably call those errors. They look like errors, and they function like errors because they undermine our measurement goals.

But they only look and function like errors if we assume respondents are trying, but failing, to reveal mental contents corresponding to the literal, facial, or intended meaning of questions. When we relax that assumption, the picture changes. A respondent who misreports having voted might not be misremembering or lying. They might be trying to communicate that they are the kind of person who does their civic duty. Depending on how

they interpret the question, they may even be trying to (and/or *actually*) offer a valid answer. After all, researchers often *do* ask about voting behavior, not for its own sake, but as an indicator of civic engagement.

Imagine a limiting case where I am so civically engaged that I got into a speeding accident rushing to the polls before they closed. I failed to cast a ballot, but would reporting that I voted contribute to a less or more valid measure of my civic disposition? I might give a "false" answer because I i) actually interpret the question as asking about intent, ii) interpret it literally but prefer to express what I see as a more accurate picture of my civic identity (especially if I was not given a chance to explain that I tried), or iii) interpret the question literally but infer that the researcher wants to measure my civic disposition and seek to offer a more valid response.

Similarly, a respondent who gives partisan answers to factual questions might not be confused. They might be signaling group loyalty or reacting to the perception that the researcher is trying to box them in. The 'error' exists only relative to our assumption about the respondent's goal. Survey researchers know all of this, but without an overarching framework, we end up responding in disparate, ad hoc fashion. In the next section, we outline our alternative perspective that systematically accounts for respondents doing something other than — or in addition to — reporting their beliefs.

A Speech Act Perspective on the Survey Response

Reporting mental contents is surely an important thing, and almost certainly the *most* important thing, that occurs in survey research. But veridical reporting is far from the *only* empirically interesting thing a respondent might do with their response. The speech act perspective incorporates features of existing models, but expands on them. Where prior accounts of the survey response focus on the mental processing behind responses, we focus on their social context and pragmatic function — what a respondent is doing, socially and politically, when they choose to answer in a particular way.

We draw on ideas first developed in J.L. Austin's massively influential book, *How to Do Things with Words*. Speech act theory has become the dominant way of understanding language in analytic philosophy and linguistics. It broadens the focus of earlier philosophy of language from *semantics*, or the meaning of words, to *pragmatics*, or the function of words – what we use them to do. Philosophers of language, prior to speech act theory, were preoccupied with the study of one thing people can do with words: assert fact-like claims that could be usefully considered true or false.

But people use words to do more than assert. Speech act theorists pointed out that people use words to do many things: greet, promise,

christen, ostend, offend, and much more. Philosophers, like Wittgenstein, Austin, Grice, Searle, and Habermas, developed and deployed speech act theory to explain such phenomena, and in so doing, questioned the assumption that all speech can be reduced to semantics.

Modern speech act theorists continue to deploy Austin's three-part model of speech acts in terms of their *locution*, *illocution*, and *perlocution*. This model draws attention to the distinctions between the physical components of speech (e.g., making sounds, marks on a page, or mouse clicks to select a response — the *locution*) from its intended goal (e.g., reporting the contents of memory, expressing one's party affiliation, subverting putatively biased researchers — the *illocution*) and its actual effects in the world (e.g., contributing to a tally of "public opinion" — the *perlocution*).

Our central claim is that we should understand surveys as an exchange of speech acts between researchers and respondents, and that reporting mental content is only one of many possible intentions driving responses. Many of the "errors" that researchers are keen to purge from their surveys emerge from an implicit negotiation with their respondents. But in surveys, such negotiations are not between equals. Researchers write the questions, set the response options, and decide what the answers mean. Speech act theorists have long recognized this problem. In most kinds of conversations,

one person often controls the agenda while the others work within those constraints (Smith and Hofmann 2016). In surveys, the imbalance is extreme. Researchers hold all the cards except one: respondents still choose what to do with their limited options.

Researchers choose the items, wording, and responses to simplify subsequent analysis. Doing so permits them to assert something about what people think, want, or believe. Subjects can stop responding altogether, but, short of that they have more options than closed ended surveys might suggest. Respondents can express what "people like them" believe rather than what they personally believe, or provide troll responses that reject the premise of faithfully reporting one's true beliefs. These alternatives are ineliminable and, ultimately, they stymie the researcher's original goal of summarizing the cognitive contents of the mass public. The coercive, agenda-setting aspect of the peculiar conversations we call surveys cannot fully constrain what people can *do* with their responses.

Such variety can be more politically important than it might seem. Take, for example, support for democratic norms (Helmke and Rath 2025). We might assume that the most important question is the extent to which people have a pre-existing commitment to sanctioning some elite actor's behavior (e.g., denying the legitimacy of a manifestly fair election). But social norms do not depend exclusively on such durable elements of our

cognition. Indeed, what differentiates a norm from a principle is that individuals believe they ought to behave a certain way, in part, because *they expect others to share and act on this belief* (Bicchieri 2006; 2017). People form, maintain, or dismantle those expectations of social injunction via speech acts — moments when we remind and reassure each other that we will meet some behavior with opprobrium, ostracism, or tolerance.

Someone's support for democratic norms depends, therefore, on both whether they personally think it would be better if the norms were followed *and* whether they expect that others will actually follow them (Graham and Svolik 2020; Helmke and Rath 2025). This inherently conditional preference does not fit well in standard measurement frameworks. We can, of course, try to measure the relevant second-order beliefs. But we create, maintain, or alter the norms themselves through ongoing speech acts. We might accommodate or even endorse actions previously regarded as norm violations after observing others accommodate them (Langton 2015).

When someone accommodates a norm violation in a survey, they are not just giving us data — they are engaging in politics. Their accommodation signals to others that the violation might be acceptable, which can shift everyone's sense of what the community permits. Norms change through countless small acts of accommodation that update our beliefs about what others will tolerate. Yet, someone can believe in a norm

while actively undermining it. A respondent might genuinely think politicians should accept election results, yet answer otherwise to show partisan solidarity. Or they may sincerely believe their preferred candidate should contest a loss *because* they believe that the opponent would, were they in the same situation. The response itself becomes a political act alongside a reported belief.

We of course need to know what people actually believe about democratic norms. But in order to know that we also need to understand when and why they are willing to publicly disavow those beliefs. The survey response includes both dimensions — the private commitment and the public performance — and both matter deeply for how democracy works.

Take, for example, signaling virtue and vice. Both affect politics by way of defining, affirming, and policing group membership (Táíwò 2022). Actors construct and maintain the groups in question via overt speech acts, not through the private contents of their minds. This is not to say that beliefs are not "real" things worth studying. Rather, when people get tangible payoffs from expressing beliefs (Williams 2020), those beliefs are empirically important whether or not they are sincere or which came first (i.e., whether someone expresses a belief because they hold it, or holds the belief because they expressed it). In such cases, treating social desirability as merely measurement error is itself an error. Survey responses may not

reliably predict whether someone will actually wait in a long line to vote. But they do say important things about whether people want to be perceived as willing to bear burdens to vote.[3]

We are not the first to argue that the survey is best understood as a stylized conversation (Schober and Conrad 1997; Tourangeau et al. 2000). However, these accounts use the conversational model only as a means of improving question comprehension and response accuracy, treating the pragmatics of that conversation useful only as an aid to semantics. In contrast, we view these pragmatics as inevitable and independently important features of exchanges of speech acts.

For some types of questions and purposes, these pragmatic effects may be benign or ignorable. The standard model covers this large, but special, subset of cases. But when beliefs depend on their social (i.e., not merely personal) function and respondents exercise agency in doing things with their responses, pragmatics are both unavoidable and substantively

[3] As Perrin and McFarland (2011, p. 100, emphasis added) write, with regard to issue attitudes: "Because we assume [individuals'] responses to be dynamic, reactive, and collective, *it is less useful to seek to isolate their individually authentic opinions than it is to understand the social cues they are giving off*." We do not believe it is always "less useful" to focus on isolating authentic opinions. But we do believe it is always important to ask ourselves which goal is more apt given the context and what the data *can* tell us.

interesting. Many well-documented phenomena in survey-based political science hinge on their pragmatics.

Cases

Political scientists have wrestled for decades with anomalies in the "mechanistic" models of the survey response. Scholars have developed mostly one-off explanations or theoretically agnostic fixes for the measurement error. We argue that the speech act perspective can subsume them under a common theoretical framework.

Expressive responding and ideological norms: Partisan expressive responding represents one of the more pressing recent challenges to the notion that survey respondents faithfully report their beliefs (Bullock et al. 2015; Prior et al. 2015). Respondents answer expressively when identity motivations lead them to deviate from reporting their actual beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. This inflates partisan differences even for questions with unambiguous correct answers, such as which photo contains more people (Schaffner and Luks 2018) or whether someone voted by mail versus in person (Shino et al. 2022). The speech act perspective helps resolve two major questions that scholars continue to debate.

First, the mechanism remains unclear. The *cheerleading* account says respondents knowingly misreport their beliefs to support their party —

they report who they are rather than what they think. They seek expressive benefits (or avoid costs) by maintaining positive associations with their party (Graham and Huber 2022). The *congenial inference* account proposes something different: people construct responses on-the-fly using whatever heuristics the context makes salient. When partisan cues dominate, they sincerely generate party-congruent answers; when other considerations dominate, their responses shift accordingly (Prior et al. 2015; Bullock and Lenz 2019; Graham and Yair 2025).

These competing mechanisms imply different answers to the second question: When experiments reduce expressive responding, do treatment groups give more "real" answers than control groups? Should researchers purge partisan expression using interventions such as accuracy incentives (Khanna and Sood 2018; Peterson and Iyengar 2021) or opportunities to express their partisanship earlier in the survey (Yair and Huber 2020), the better to elicit the respondents' "true" beliefs?

Under congenial inference, the answer depends on what you want to measure. To discover whether partisans know inconvenient facts, researchers should intervene so as to extract them. But real-world political behavior includes congenial inferences that must be left intact for us to study and understand them. Under cheerleading, the answer seems clearer: expressive responding is measurement error that should be minimized. If

survey research aims to elicit true beliefs, and respondents knowingly misreport their beliefs, then expressive responses are in an important sense incorrect. Prior et al. (2015: 490) captured this view: inflated partisan gaps in factual knowledge are "bad news for survey research, but good news for democracy" because citizens can still act on their concealed "true" beliefs, preserving democratic accountability.

But Malka and Adelman (2023) rightly challenge this logic. Why would concealed factual beliefs drive behavior more than the partisan commitments that caused cheerleading in the first place? It seems more likely that interventions like accuracy incentives reduce external validity. We agree. One could discount expressive responses as cheap talk if private beliefs determine behavior, but causality runs both ways. Our beliefs have social as well as individual-level functions. We often adopt them to rationalize our commitments and signal our identities – not just to track truth (Williams 2020). Expressive signaling facilitates the norm-bound collective action that is central to politics (Pickup et al. 2022).

From the speech act perspective, partisan expression becomes meaningful political behavior regardless of the mechanism. We can think of the survey response itself as a form of political behavior (Graham and Huber 2022; Silber et al. 2022) that reflects the respondent's intentions, even as it is also an expressed belief that does or does not reflect the respondent's

true mental representation of the world. Often, what we intend to do is support our coalition, and factual assertions are merely a means to that end. Adjudicating between mechanisms is itself scientifically important, but both also carry practical implications.

This insight extends to attitude questions. (Bullock et al. 2015: 523) conjectured that respondents who misstate factual beliefs to support their political in-group might similarly misstate their stances on policy issues. Groenendyk et al. (2023) would seem to support this conjecture: asking respondents to first estimate their in-group's ideological positions increased their own ideological constraint. But to ask which are the "true" stances misses the core insight from the study: that ideology operates through social norms. From the speech act perspective, norm-induced preferences are perfectly consistent with theories of ideology that emphasize its social origins and functions (Converse 1964; Bawn 1999; Wan and Green 2024).

Misreported behaviors and subjective identities: Shino et al. (2022) documented a revealing case of expressive misreporting: some Republican respondents claimed they voted in person when administrative records showed they voted by mail. After Republican elites criticized vote-by-mail during the 2020 election, these voters faced a choice — report what they actually did or what voters like them "ought" to have done. Some chose group identity over accuracy.

This pattern extends well beyond partisanship and reveals substantively interesting phenomena beyond measurement error. Survey estimates consistently overstate voter turnout because some respondents claim they voted when they did not. This error is not random; the same respondents who are more likely to have actually voted (such as those with a college degree) are also more likely to misreport *having* voted (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012). They are not confused or forgetful. Instead, they are more sensitive to the social norm of voting and want to present themselves as the kind of person who votes (Silver et al. 1986).

The same dynamic shapes self-reports about other normative behaviors (Schwarz and Oyserman 2001) such as news consumption (Prior 2009) or watching presidential debates (Prior 2012). Indeed, survey-based measures of media consumption are so consistently unreliable that researchers are turning to alternative, "ground-truth" measures based on passively-collected behavioral data (Guess et al. 2019; Konitzer et al. 2021; Robertson et al. 2023; Parry et al. 2021).

We agree that direct behavioral measures will outperform self-reports when you need to know what people actually did (Prior 2013). But sometimes what matters is not whether someone watched Fox News yesterday, but whether they consider themselves the kind of person who watches Fox News. If so, it is alright if the respondent does something other

than try (with varying degrees of success) to remember when they watched Fox News. Even when researchers need accurate behavioral data, recognizing that respondents might be performing rather than reporting helps explain systematic patterns in the "errors."

This point extends to supposedly fixed characteristics. Egan (2019) found that respondents change their reported ethnicity and ancestry to align with their political identities. The standard model struggles here — does each respondent maintain a file of stable traits they occasionally update, and dutifully retrieve when asked? The speech act perspective offers a simpler explanation: respondents present different aspects of their identity depending on what they want to accomplish in that moment. The survey context shapes which signals seem germane.

Trolling and reactance: The standard account allows for misunderstanding between the researcher and respondents, but it assumes good-faith. Even when respondents are cheerleading, they try to communicate something meaningful, just not what researchers asked for. But online self-administered surveys strip away the social cues — body language, tone of voice — that would help researchers detect violations of this assumption.

This mode shift cuts both ways. Removing the interviewer reduces social desirability bias, helps respondents disclose sensitive information,

and more thoroughly standardizes survey administration (Heerwegh 2009; Chang and Krosnick 2010; Lind et al. 2013). But the flip side of those virtues is that we lose the opportunity to observe race, gender, or other interviewer effects that may shed light on real-world political interactions. It also makes it more difficult for the interviewer to both monitor social norms governing conversation, including attention (Berinsky et al. 2014) and sincerity, and signal their own intentions. When respondents sense that the researcher is violating communicative norms, some will respond in kind.

Such is the case with survey "trolling" (Lopez and Hillygus 2018). Trolling is a speech act defined by intent to deceive for amusement (Hardaker 2010; Connolly 2022). Trolls do not use language to communicate beliefs; their actual beliefs are irrelevant. They seek to disrupt, divide, and entertain by fooling their target while winking at onlookers (Connolly 2022). Lopez and Hillygus (2018) show that survey trolling makes conspiracy theories, absurd beliefs, and rare characteristics seem more common than they really are.

One obvious implication is to treat such estimates with caution. But the deeper insight concerns the conversational dynamics. The authors argue that some trolling stems from respondents believing that ridiculous questions warrant ridiculous answers. Of course, respondents troll for many reasons, but their ability to subvert the researcher's agenda with limited

response options reveals the inherently interactive nature of surveys. If the respondent does not feel that the researcher is asking questions in good faith, they may feel justified in doing the same.

These dynamics extend beyond trolling. When respondents detect manipulation, condescension, or a covert agenda, they are likely to exhibit reactance (Brehm 1966; Kim et al. 2014). They may "misbehave" using the only tools at their disposal: how they answer or whether they answer at all (Sischka et al. 2022).

Consider the contested "backfire effect." Nyhan and Reifler (2010) found conservatives doubled down on the Iraq WMD myth when corrected. Later studies across different issues found the opposite — people generally accept corrections (Wood and Porter 2019; Swire-Thompson et al. 2020; Guess and Coppock 2020).

Velez and Liu (2025) resolved this puzzle elegantly. They first elicited beliefs important to the individual respondent, then used large language models to generate tailored counter-arguments with varying civility. Even on these "core" issues, polite disagreement did not cause backfire. Only uncivil, confrontational counterarguments did. It was not enough to tell respondents they were wrong, because they did not reject facts per se. They rejected having their beliefs *insulted*, and (understandably) doubled down in

response. Such behavior is unintelligible without accounting for the survey respondent's role as a conversational partner.

Open-ended responses: Open-ended questions offer one obvious solution to closed-ended questions' restricted vocabulary — let respondents use their own words. Researchers lose standardization but respondents gain agency to communicate what they actually want to say. Open-ended responses have long helped when closed-ended options create response artifacts (Hobbs and Ong 2023; Kraft 2024) or cannot capture the construct (Schuman and Scott 1987; Feldman and Zaller 1992). Unfortunately, analyzing them at scale was often impractical until recently. Now large language models enable researchers to do more with open-ended questions, such as tailor treatments to individual respondents (Costello et al. 2024; Velez 2024), probe for clarification (Barari et al. 2025), and efficiently annotate responses (Gilardi et al. 2023; Mellon et al. 2024; DiGuiseppe and Flynn 2025).

But using open-ended responses more often, in more different ways, requires that we understand what respondents do when answering open-ended questions. Hobbs and (Green 2025) propose a model, adapted from RAS, in which respondents first identify a general attitude to express, then select one of many possible specific statements that could convey it. To infer the expressed attitude, one must estimate the range of statements the

respondent could have made without changing what they meant (in our terms, without changing their *illocution*).

This account of open-ended responses is well-aligned with our speech act perspective in at least three respects. First, the ability to classify or categorize the specific statement the respondent happened to make is not the same thing as inferring the underlying attitude the respondent was trying to express. This is consistent with prior qualitative analyses of open-ended responses, in which researchers have noticed that a wide range of "frames of reference" are reducible to a smaller number of "directional thrusts" (Zaller and Feldman 1992). Furthermore, as is the case when analyzing closed-ended responses, interpreting the semantic content of the response without attending to what the respondent was trying to do with those words can lead researchers astray.

For example, Schuman and Presser (1980) asked respondents about a highly obscure policy proposal that few if any respondents would be familiar with. Nevertheless, a non-trivial share of respondents used the opportunity to try and convey their attitude regarding the more general policy issue they inferred the question was about.[4] This led the authors to caution against interpreting the policy stances as "non-attitudes." The

[4] While the question itself was not open-ended, the context of the survey (a telephone interview) allowed for qualitative interpretation of what the respondents intended to communicate in their closed-ended responses.

answers were clearly non-random expressions of attitudes, even if those attitudes could not be directly related to the object of the survey question.

Second, respondents use symbolic language to efficiently communicate more meaning than is contained in the semantic content of the words they use. When opposing the Affordable Care Act, they deploy terms like "socialism" or "big government," but they do not need to correctly define socialism or be able to precisely articulate what constitutes "big government" for researchers to infer what they mean by using those terms.

Third, because categorizing a specific statement in isolation is insufficient to infer general attitudes, the latter task requires responses to be analyzed in context. As Hobbs and Green (2025) show, this is in part because words that are relatively more common in the context of responses to the open-ended survey question, including terms that reflect symbolic language, are particularly informative for pooling information across respondents. While specific, rare words may be useful for predicting outcomes like respondent partisanship within a given survey, they are likelier to be idiosyncratic to that particular respondent and response and therefore less useful for the unsupervised task of inferring more general attitudes that are likely to be repeated across multiple respondents and survey waves. Drawing inferences using contextually common words also requires fewer researcher-imposed assumptions regarding what a specific

open-ended response happens to mean, which is important as these assumptions are often wrong (Glazier et al. 2021).

The cases we have discussed so far are far from exhaustive. We see the speech act perspective as a general-purpose account of the heavily stylized conversation that takes place between the researcher and respondent when answering questions. We encourage readers to consider how it might be usefully applied to further cases such as non-separable preferences (Lacy 2001), differential item functioning (Jessee 2021), information effects on issue preference estimates (Althaus 1998; Graham 2021), expressed emotions (Oceno 2025), and so on.

General Discussion and Potential Objections

Our speech act perspective offers an importantly different account of what happens when researchers conduct surveys and respondents answer them. Rather than treating surveys as mechanical extraction devices that retrieve mental contents, we recognize them as conversations — heavily stylized and asymmetric, but conversations nonetheless. Respondents do not merely report; they act. They express identities, signal group membership, resist perceived manipulation, and engage in the work of democratic citizenship. These pragmatic dimensions are not measurement errors to be minimized but constitute the substance of public opinion as it

operates in democratic life, for good or for ill. Acknowledging that fact raises the chances we can act for the good.

Changing our perspective in this way addresses three interconnected problems with the standard "error perspective." First, it acknowledges that survey responses are actions with social and political consequences, not just reports of private mental states. When a Republican respondent claims to have voted in person despite voting by mail, they are not simply misremembering — they are performing solidarity in a polarized political environment. Second, it recognizes that pragmatic considerations are necessary for interpreting even ostensibly straightforward factual questions. The meaning of any response depends on what the respondent understands themselves to be doing, which cannot be reduced to semantic content alone. Third, it transforms apparent anomalies — from partisan cheerleading to survey trolling — from errors to be purged into meaningful signals about how citizens engage with political discourse. Nevertheless, several objections to our perspective merit consideration.

"Speech acts are too 'soft' for rigorous social science." This objection reflects the classic drunkard's search problem — looking for our keys under the streetlight because that's where the light is best. Semantic content is easier to code and analyze than pragmatic intent. But if we are serious about

understanding public opinion, we often need to venture into the shadows to find what we are looking for.

"Even if theoretically sound, the approach is methodologically intractable:" Researchers already implicitly recognize speech acts when they design surveys to minimize social desirability bias or worry about experimenter demand effects. We are simply making explicit what everyone knows: respondents do things with their answers beyond reporting beliefs, and researchers need to account for that and their own goals and biases. Far from being intractable, embracing a different perspective reveals new methodological possibilities that we discuss below. Moreover, recent advances in natural language processing are already helping us wrestle with the pragmatic dimensions of communication at scale.

"We already know this—it's just dressed up in fancy philosophical language." The philosophical framework is not window dressing; it is a coherent alternative that subsumes diverse phenomena—from expressive responding to ideological constraint to misreported turnout—under a single theoretical umbrella that reveals new possibilities. That is not redundancy; it is parsimony and fecundity.

"Strategic responding is rare. Most people just answer quickly without thinking." This important objection nevertheless misunderstands both our argument and human communication. First, speech acts do not require

conscious strategizing any more than ordinary conversation does. When we greet someone, we do not usually "decide" to perform the speech act of greeting — we just say "hello!" Second, the evidence suggests strategic responding is neither rare nor randomly distributed. High-status respondents are more likely to misreport voting; partisans are more likely to give expressive responses on politically charged topics, and so on. These patterns reveal systematic pragmatic choices, conscious or not.

"This approach lacks standardization and opens the door to interpretive chaos." Pragmatics are indeed contextual, but that is precisely why mechanistic accounts of the survey response fail — they assume away the context that gives responses meaning. Rather than chaos, recognizing the pragmatic dimension allows us to explicitly theorize about context effects. Nor do we advocate for mere ideographic description. We only claim that when designing surveys, we should attend to public opinion's democratic functions beyond aggregating private preferences.

Implications and Applications

Implications for Democratic Theory: Our perspective speaks to longstanding debates about the nature and value of public opinion. Critics from Lippmann to Key to Zaller worry that citizens lack stable, coherent preferences on most political issues. If surveys merely reveal this

incoherence, then democratic responsiveness to public opinion seems problematic.

But if survey responses are speech acts rather than preference reports, the picture changes. Citizens may not have a vending machine full of policy preferences waiting to be retrieved, but they do have identities, values, and group loyalties they express and defend. Democratic politics involves not only aggregating pre-formed preferences but also the ongoing social construction of political meaning through communicative action. Surveys capture this process in motion. This does not mean celebrating all expressive responding or abandoning concerns about democratic competence. But it does mean moving beyond the deficit model where citizens either have the requisite political knowledge and should be taken seriously or they lack it and should be discounted.

Implications for Using *Public Opinion Research:* Adopting the speech act perspective fundamentally reorients how we think about public opinion's role in democracy. Rather than viewing surveys as tools for extracting authentic private beliefs that then guide political behavior – as one might in market research – we recognize them as sites where citizens enact political identities and negotiate social norms (Elster 1997). This is not a bug to be fixed but a feature that deepens science and better connects survey research to democratic practice.

Implications for Doing *Public Opinion Research:* The speech act perspective does not just reorient how we interpret survey responses — it suggests concrete changes to how we design and implement survey research. We need to frame conversations instead of focusing solely on building a better mouse trap. If surveys are conversations more than measurement machines, and if respondents are agents rather than information repositories, then our methods should reflect this reality:

(A) Planning for Multiple Illocutions: Traditional survey design assumes a single valid illocution: veridical reporting. But once we recognize that respondents do different things with their answers, we can be more systematic about designing surveys that channel respondents toward specific ones, and better yet, accommodate multiple illocutions. Consider these alternatives to a generic question about support for immigration:

- "What do you personally believe about immigration levels?"
- "What position on immigration would you publicly defend?"
- "What do most people like you think about immigration?"
- "What immigration policy would you vote for on the ballot?"
- "What immigration policy should we adopt as a country?"

Each question prompts a different illocutionary act. The first seeks private belief, the second public commitment, the third group identity, the fourth

individual behavioral intention, and the fifth normative evaluation of collective action. Depending on what we seek to do with the answers, some questions may be more apt than others. Or we might randomize them among subjects, adapt them to particular subjects, or ask multiple versions in proximity over multiple waves. Researchers could also use large language models to probe these differences after a more generic initial question. Comparisons would demonstrate the multifaceted nature of political attitudes and the uses we put them to.

(B) Contextual Variation as Data and Interpretive Context: The error perspective treats contextual effects – question order, interviewer characteristics, survey sponsor – as nuisances to be minimized. The speech act perspective regards them as essential data about how respondents understand the conversational situation and potential windows onto new scientific and political questions. Researchers could (and in some cases, do) systematically vary perceived survey sponsors (academic researchers versus partisan organizations), explicitly manipulate conversational norms ("We're interested in your honest personal opinion" versus "We're documenting what Americans are willing to say publicly"), or alter the implied audience for results ("Your responses will remain completely private" versus "We'll share aggregate results with your elected representatives"). These variations

do not introduce bias—they reveal how political communication works in different social contexts.

(C) Analyzing Pragmatic Intent Computationally: Modern natural language processing opens unprecedented possibilities for analyzing not just what respondents say but what they are trying to do with their words. Open-ended responses have always allowed respondents more conversational agency, but analyzing them at scale has been challenging. Now we can move beyond coding semantic content to inferring pragmatic intent. For instance, when respondents explain their position on healthcare, we can identify whether they are primarily describing personal experiences, citing empirical claims, expressing group solidarity, towing their ideological line, signaling expertise, deflecting the question's premise, etc. These classifications aren't mutually exclusive — a single response might accomplish multiple goals. Identifying the mix of illocutionary acts opens up a much wider range of interpretive, explanatory, and practical opportunities.

(D) Recursive Questions in Surveys: If respondents are agents who interpret our questions through their own understanding of what we are doing, we should study that interpretation directly much more often. After substantive questions, we could ask:

"What did you think we were trying to learn with that question?"

"Were you mainly reporting your view, or were you trying to accomplish something else?"

"Who did you imagine would ultimately see these results?"

Such a meta-conversation is less asymmetric and invites respondents to become collaborators on the surveys and their role in democratic politics.

(E) Validation Beyond Accuracy: We currently validate surveys by checking whether responses correspond to facts: Did the person actually vote? Do they really watch the news as much as they claim? But if responses are speech acts, validation requires different approaches. We might validate expressive responses by checking whether they predict other forms of political expression. Do people who cheerlead for their party in surveys also do so on social media? Do responses about democratic norms change when respondents believe their answers will be shared with their social network? This does not mean abandoning traditional validation — sometimes we do need to know whether people actually voted. But it means recognizing that validity itself depends on what we think respondents are doing with their answers.

(F) Political-Ethical Implications: Finally, recognizing surveys as asymmetric conversations raises ethical questions typically absent from measurement-only approaches. If we know respondents might be trying to signal group membership or maintain self-respect, should we design

questions that force them to choose between accuracy and identity? When we publish results showing that "40% of Americans believe X," knowing that some portion was engaged in expressive responding rather than belief reporting, what are our obligations to both respondents and the public? Democratic theorists address these difficult questions. But the speech act perspective reveals that they are unavoidable for scientists and practitioners as well. We need to honestly engage the fact that survey research intervenes in democratic politics even as it seeks to measure it (Herbst 1992).

Limitations: Our account necessarily leaves important questions unresolved. We have focused primarily on closed-ended survey questions, but the rise of LLM-enabled analysis for open-ended responses offers unprecedented opportunities to study speech acts in less constrained contexts. How do respondents navigate the expanded agency that open-ended questions provide? How do language models themselves function as participants in these conversational exchanges?

Future Research: We also need more systematic inquiry about when and why respondents shift between different illocutionary modes. Under what conditions does someone prioritize accurate reporting versus expressive responding? How do features of survey design — question ordering, response options, perceived surveyor identity — shape these

choices? And crucially, how do these dynamics vary across political and cultural contexts where the norms governing political talk differ?

Conclusion

Surveys have become so central to how we understand public opinion that we rarely step back to examine critically and respond to what we are *doing* when we ask questions, what respondents are *doing* when they answer them, and what we all *do* with the reports. We typically treat these exchanges as a measurement exercise: researchers try to extract accurate information about mental contents, and deviations from this goal constitute errors to be minimized. We have argued that this perspective often confounds its own goals and it obscures crucial features of how public opinion actually operates (and could operate better) in democratic life.

Our speech act perspective reveals surveys as what they have always been: peculiar, stylized conversations wherein researchers, respondents, and audiences negotiate meaning under intensely asymmetrical conditions. The researcher controls the questions, the response options, and the presumptive interpretation. But respondents retain agency in how they choose to participate in this exchange. They can report, perform, resist, or play along. And though they rarely do, audiences can interpret, use, and respond to them beyond uncritical acceptance, outright dismissal, or cynical

misappropriation. Understanding these choices as speech acts — as things people do with words — transforms apparent errors into meaningful political behavior.

This change in perspective is not merely a theoretical exercise. As democracy faces a crisis globally, understanding how public opinion forms and functions becomes ever more urgent. We mistake partisan performance for sincere belief. And even when we recognize the distinction, we do not even ask questions about the difference, because the one is dismissed as noise. In doing so, we misunderstand the very processes through which democratic publics constitute themselves. The fever of democratic crisis may eventually break, but when it does, we will need better tools for understanding how citizens relate to political institutions and to each other.

The research agenda opened up by our perspective is both methodologically innovative and democratically vital. Advances in computational text analysis offer unprecedented opportunities to analyze the pragmatic dimensions of survey responses at scale. Rather than treating these tools as simply better ways to extract information and minimize error, we can use them to understand the full range of what respondents try to or actually do accomplish. We might approach the most crucial exchange through a kind of "Receive-Act-Signal" model, where responses emerge from the intersection of the researchers' initial choices and actions,

respondents' considerations, and everyone's social intentions and communicative possibilities.

Ultimately, taking the speech act perspective seriously means recognizing that public opinion research does not just measure democratic politics — it participates in it. Every survey creates a moment of political communication, however artificial. Every published result potentially shifts the social facts that constitute democratic culture. We do not use surveys like traffic police use radar guns. We use them to do much more interactive things: to influence elections, to shape policy debates, to construct social scientific knowledge, and — not least — to tell stories about who we are as a political community. Recognizing this does not undermine the scientific value of survey research. Instead, it reveals the full complexity and importance of understanding how we do things with surveys.

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