Module 4: Reporting on studies and surveys

Surveys and polling

More than any other type of research, surveys and polling may be the most common. Unlike academic research, surveys are explicitly designed for mass consumption and can be conducted in 24 hours. As a result, they are both exceedingly easy to both use and abuse. Very tiny differences in how surveys are conducted or worded can dramatically affect the outcome. Surveys are extremely volatile and unlike academic research, often present conclusions without being explicit about their mathematical shortcomings.

Below are a list of all the most common types of ways that survey wording can affect the outcome. To give you an idea of just how much wording effects the outcome of a survey: when Pew conducted a poll on the Affordable Care Act, it asked the question in two seemingly identical ways.

As you may know, by 2014 nearly all Americans will be required to have health insurance. People who do not buy insurance will pay a penalty while people who cannot afford it will receive financial help from the government. Do you approve or disapprove of this policy?

And...

As you may know, by 2014 nearly all Americans will be required to have health insurance. People who cannot afford insurance will receive financial help from the government while people who do not buy it will pay a penalty. Do you approve or disapprove of this policy?

In passage 1, 47% disapprove of the law, while in passage 2, a majority (63%) disapprove. "Levels of approval of the provision were highly sensitive to which aspect of the law was mentioned last," concluded Pew.

In other words, very tiny differences can often radically change the result. Any survey which does not account for these differences is seriously flawed.

The list of the big no-nos are:

- Biased wording
- The forbid/allow asymmetry
- Using familiar terms
- Double-barrel questions
- Odd or incomparable response options
- Failure to include a "don't know" or "other" response option

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Biased Wording

Favorable language - any hint of favorability toward one side, without explicitly acknowledging the reasonableness of countering views, will result in a biased result.

In one instance, a technology political lobby conducted backed a widely reported study on how the American public supported immigration reform. The results were much different than what Pew had found on the same topic. When I asked them to send me the actual wording, at first they refused. Finally, after I told them I wouldn't write about their survey, they capitulated and send me this wording:

> "There is a bipartisan immigration reform proposal in congress. This proposal does three main things. It strongly increases border security, to prevent future illegal immigration. It requires employers to verify the legal status of job seekers, to crack down on hiring illegal immigrants. And it establishes a pathway to u.s. citizenship for the eleven million illegal immigrants presently in the country, as long as they pass a criminal background check, pay a fine and back taxes, learn english, and wait at least thirteen years…"

So, on the surface, this may seem fine, but here's why it resulted in more positive ratings

1. There is no such thing as "bi-partisan" on a controversial topic. If it was bi-partisan, the law would have easily passed, which it didn't
2. "...strongly increases border security". That's a highly subjective interpretation
3. "...crack down": this is non-technical language, makes the law seem more stringent than it may be.
4. It only lists the positive aspects of the bill and doesn't give context to any criticism.

For a funny take on biased wording, check out this old British political sitcom, "Leading Questions" on Yes, Prime Minister

Forbid/allow asymmetry

Often, respondents are more concerned with how a law is applied than the law itself. In 2007, when the General Social Survey asked about interracial marriage, 19% of respondents supported the idea that the state should "forbid" interracial marriage, while 32% disagreed with the idea that the state should "allow" interracial marriage.

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Americans, in general, are more averse to the state telling people what to do than they are of any particular law. In other words, a law "forbidding" activity will not yield the same results as a "allowing" the same thing

Familiar language

A survey that asks about a popular law will get different results than one that asks about the provisions of the law. For instance, Reuters found that a slight majority opposed "Obamacare", but, at the same time, majorities favored most of the major provisions of the law, when the word "obamacare" was not reference. This isn't to say that pollsters shouldn't use familiar language; it's just that the interpretation of the poll changes when they do.

There is no correct way to ask about the Affordable Care Act. When asked about "Obamacare", the survey reveals what the public thinks about a law itself. When asked about the policies but not the name, the poll reveals what the public likes about the actual policies. In a democracy, these are two different things and must be reported as such.

Double-barrel questions

These are questions with dual meanings. "Do you agree that immigration is a problem and the Congress should act?" A respondent can agree with first part and not the second.

In other cases, a double-barrell question references an institution with a policy: "Do you agree with the Supreme Court decision to allow affirmative action?"

Respondents will often support or a oppose an idea based on who else supports it. In this instance, depending on their views about the authority of the Supreme Court, they could be more or less likely to answer "yes". It's difficult to disentangle multiple interpretations with poorly worded questions.

Response options

Not all responses are the same. "Agree" and "Disagree" are familiar and distinct options, but don't assume a survey gave respondents these stock response options.

For instance, Facebook once surveyed me and asked me "How much fun is facebook overall?"

- Extremely fun
- Very fun
- Somewhat fun
- Slightly fun
- Not fun at all.

I don't know what it even means for facebook to be "fun". I like Facebook, but don't consider it fun. In this case, if I answer "no fun at all", it presumes I don't like Facebook

Other Issues

Surveys on wonky issues

Respondents will give an answer to a question whether they know anything about the issue or not. For instance, 39% of Americans have an opinion on the Panetta-Burns budget plan, even though no such plan actually exists.

If a survey asks about a wonky issue, and most given an answer, expect that many respondents are just making it up.

High or low numbers

Be very skeptical of any survey that has high or low numbers: anything with answers below 20% or above 80% should trigger a red flag, anything below 10% or above 90% is probably invalid.

Americans, for the most part, can't agree unanimously on just about anything. As of 2008, 30% believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (when he, in fact, did not). Any truly representative survey should have a certain percent of respondents who hold extreme views. In other words, most respondents shouldn't agree on anything. Be skeptical of high and low numbers.