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Opinions on Fictitious Issues: The Pressure to Answer Survey Questions

GEORGE F. BISHOP, ALFRED J. TUCHFARBER AND ROBERT W. OLDENDICK

A VARIETY of studies since the early years of public opinion research have demonstrated that people are quite willing to express opinions on fictitious issues, objects, and events. Bishop and his associates (1980,

¹ For an early example, see Hartley's (1946) studies of prejudice in which large majorities of college students were willing to express opinions about fictitious nationalities (e.g., "Wallonians"). See also Kolson and Green's (1970) demonstration of opinions among grade-school children about a nonexistent political figure (Thomas Walker) and Collett and O'Shea's (1976) study of people giving directions to a fictional place. References are frequently made, too, to Gill's (1947) report of large numbers of people who were willing to offer opinions on a fictional "Metallic Metals Act," but Schuman and Presser (1981) have pointed out that this report is just an anecdote with no documentation provided on the population or the sample size.

Abstract This research shows, as have previous studies, that a substantial number of people will offer opinions on fictitious topics in the context of a survey interview. The results of a split-ballot experiment (and a replication) with three fictitious public affairs issues suggest that people give opinions on such matters in large part because of the pressure to answer survey questions that is created by the way in which the questions are asked and by the manner in which "don't know" responses are handled by the interviewer. The findings also indicate that there may be little or no relationship between an individual's willingness to admit ignorance and his or her inclination to volunteer opinions on fictitious issues, as measured by at least one item from the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. In addition, the data demonstrate that blacks and less well-educated respondents are more likely than their counterparts to offer opinions on fictitious issues.

George F. Bishop is Associate Professor of Political Science and a Senior Research Associate in the Institute for Policy Research at the University of Cincinnati. Alfred J. Tuchfarber is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Institute for Policy Research. Robert W. Oldendick is Assistant Director of the Institute for Policy Research. This research project was supported by a grant from the Procter & Gamble Company of Cincinnati, Ohio. The authors would like to thank Jack Henry, Manager of Marketing Research at P&G, for funding the project. The authors would also like to thank the anonymous referees for their helpful comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

1983), for example, have found that a sizable percentage of respondents (roughly 30 percent) will give an opinion on a fictitious "1975 Public Affairs Act" if they are not offered an explicit response alternative which allows them to admit that they "don't know" anything about it. Similarly, Schuman and Presser (1981) have discovered that about 30 percent of the respondents in their national surveys will, if not given an explicit chance to say thay have "no opinion" on the subject, answer questions about real, but highly obscure, pieces of legislation such as The Agricultural Trade Act of 1978 and The Monetary Control Bill of 1979. Such are the pressures in a typical interview to answer survey questions.

From such studies, we have also learned that some people are more likely than others to offer opinions on obscure or fictitious issues: blacks more likely than whites, and the less educated more likely than the better educated (Bishop et al., 1980; Schuman and Presser, 1981; Ch. 5). The latter finding is somewhat puzzling because, as Schuman and Presser have noted, less educated respondents are generally less likely, not more likely, to volunteer opinions on public affairs issues. What explains the difference? Schuman and Presser have suggested that better educated people may be more willing than those who are less well-educated to admit their ignorance on topics which they do not recognize. Bishop and his colleagues (1980) have proposed a similar explanation, hypothesizing that blacks and less educated respondents. of whatever race, may offer opinions on the Public Affairs Act to "save face" with "our presumptively white middle-class interviewing staff ... calling from the University...." Common to both these explanations is the idea that people have a disposition or personality characteristic which makes them either more or less willing to admit their ignorance on public affairs.

Neither of these dispositional hypotheses, however, has been directly tested or pitted against an equally plausible explanation, also suggested by Schuman and Presser: "that low-educated respondents are especially susceptible to pressures in the interview to give an opinion even where they have none (p.152)." Furthermore, Schuman and Presser have noticed that, in some instances, interviewers increase the pressure on respondents to give an answer by (inappropriately) repeating the question to them even though they have already indicated that they "don't know" anything about the subject. Respondents thus get

² Bishop et al. (1980, fn. 10) report an almost perfect correlation (.99) between the race of the respondent perceived by the interviewer in the first wave of a telephone panel study and the respondent's self-reported race in the second wave, indicating that the race of the respondent (and by implication, the interviewer's) can be accurately inferred over the phone.

the message that the interviewer expects them to answer the question. The majority of respondents do not conform to this implicit demand, but a sizable number do, indicating that the pressure to give an opinion in this situation can be quite compelling. That, in fact, is what the experiment described here was designed to demonstrate: that people give opinions on obscure or fictitious issues largely because of the "demand characteristics" of the survey interview (cf. Orne, 1962). The experiment was also designed to test the alternative dispositional hypothesis: that people give opinions on such matters because they are unwilling to admit that they are ignorant. Included in the design, as well, was an analysis of the response effects of the two major demographic variables in previous research: race and education.

Research Design

In November and early December of 1983 we conducted the first of two split-ballot experiments on people's responses to questions about three fictitious issues: The 1975 Public Affairs Act, The Agricultural Trade Act of 1983, and The Monetary Control Bill of 1983. The questions were all asked, together, near the middle of the interview, as part of a multipurpose, random-digit-dialed telephone survey,³ and either immediately before or after questions about three public affairs issues which were not fictitious (see Appendix). The latter items were included to provide a cover for asking respondents about the fictitious issues as well as a test and control for the influence of question context.⁴

The question about the Public Affairs Act was drawn from the experiments by Bishop et al. (1980). The questions about the Agricultural Trade Act and the Monetary Control Bill were adapted from the items developed originally by Schuman and Presser (1981: Ch. 5): The Agricultural Trade Act of 1978 and The Monetary Control Bill of 1979 (emphais added). We changed the year of these legislative acts—to

³ The response rate (fully completed interviews) for this Greater Cincinnati Survey was 71.5 percent. The refusal rate was 15.8 percent. The remainder consisted of partially completed interviews (3.2 percent) and potential interviews that were not completed because of a language barrier, a hearing problem, illiteracy, senility, or physical illness (5.6 percent) or because the selected respondent was away on vacation, a business trip, or avoided an appointment for some other reason (3.9 percent).

⁴ The question about whether the federal government is doing too many things that should be handled by the private sector was adapted from an item developed originally by the National Opinion Research Center (see NORC Study 4179, December 1973; 14, University of Chicago). The questions on trade with the Soviet Union and government spending were both adapted from items designed by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan (see the 1982 National Election Study Cross-Section Interview: 52 and 55).

1983—to make them appear up-to-date and thus more compelling as issues on which the respondent should probably have an opinion.⁵ To our knowledge, there were no such legislative matters pending in Congress at the time of survey. Nor is it likely that any respondent knew anything about the real, but obscure, legislation from which these items were initially derived.

QUESTION FORMS

The questions were asked in one of three forms, to which respondents were randomly assigned:

- 1. Form A. In this form the questions were asked with an explicit response alternative (a filter) which allowed respondents to indicate that they hadn't thought much about the issue (see Appendix).⁶
- 2. Form B. Here the questions were asked without an explicit filter. But if the respondents volunteered that they didn't know anything about the topic or gave a qualified answer to the question other than the two response alternatives that were read to them (e.g., agree/disagree), the interviewers were instructed not to probe them in any way, but rather to record, verbatim, whatever the respondent said.
- 3. Form C. The questions in this form were also asked without a filter. However, if the respondents volunteered a "don't know" response or offered a qualified answer to the question, the interviewers were told to pressure them into selecting one of the two forced-choices (e.g., favor/oppose) by repeating the question, by rereading the choices, or both.

Forms B and C were varied to test Schuman and Presser's proposition about the pressure interviewers put on respondents by probing, or what we call the "demand characteristics" hypothesis.

QUESTION ORDER AND CONTEXT

In addition, we varied the order in which the groups of questions were asked, randomly assigning respondents to one of two conditions: in one condition, respondents were asked the group of questions about

⁵ The wording of the filter used with our adaptation of these questions—i.e., "or haven't you thought much about this issue?"—differs from the one used by Schuman and Presser—i.e., "or do you not have an opinion on that issue?" This variation may have had some effect on the proportion of DK responses observed in our experiment, but it is probably a minor one (see Bishop et al., 1983 on the effects of differently worded filter questions).

⁶ Respondents receiving this form were *not* probed if they volunteered a "don't know" response or gave a qualified answer to the item. This, we reasoned, was consistent with the intent of the filtered form, which was to make it acceptable not to have an opinion on an issue. It also seemed consistent not to pressure respondents who received this form into selecting one of the forced-choices, but rather to let them "freely" qualify their answers if they wanted to.

the fictitious issues immediately before the group of questions about the nonfictitious issues; in the other condition, immediately after them. Within each of these groups, however, the three questions were asked in the same sequence in both conditions (see Appendix). This manipulation allowed us to test whether respondents would be more susceptible to being pressured into answering the questions about the fictitious issues when they were asked in one context rather than another.

MEASUREMENT OF WILLINGNESS TO ADMIT IGNORANCE

To tap the disposition to admit ignorance, we adapted an item from the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne and Marlowe, 1964) and asked it along with four other items from the same scale which allowed us to construct a general index of the tendency of people to present themselves to others in a favorable light. The five items, the fourth of which measured a person's willingness to admit ignorance, were worded as follows.⁷

Now I'd like to read you some statements about personality characteristics. As I read each one, please tell me whether the statement is true or false as it applies to you personally.

- 1. I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone's feelings—is that true or false?
 - 2. I'm always willing to admit it when I make a mistake—is that true or false?
- 3. No matter who I am talking to, I'm always a good listener—is that true or false?
- 4. When I don't know something I don't at all mind admitting it—is that true or false?
- 5. I'm always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable—is that true or false?

Because responses to the question about admitting ignorance might influence responses to questions about the fictitious issues, or vice versa, we decided to randomize the location of the Marlowe-Crowne items: they were asked shortly before the fictitious and nonfictitious issues in one condition; shortly after them, in the other. To hide the connection between the question about admitting ignorance and the fictitious issues, we not only embedded it among the other Marlowe-Crowne items but also created a brief "buffer" between these items and the issues with two questions about the local major league baseball team. The latter were asked immediately after the Marlowe-Crowne

⁷ If respondents tried to qualify their answers to these questions by saying such things as, "Well that's true sometimes, but not always," interviewers were instructed to probe them by asking: "Is it mostly true or mostly false?" In addition, they were instructed to probe all "don't know" responses by repeating the question. This was done to minimize missing data.

items, and just before the issue questions, in one condition; immediately before, and just after, in the other.

REPLICATION

In May and early June of 1984 we replicated the entire experiment, exactly, again as part of a multipurpose, random-digit-dialed telephone survey.⁸

Findings

The data in Table 1 demonstrate that the form in which the questions are asked, and the way in which the "don't know" (DK) responses are dealt with, makes a substantial difference in the results. People were much more likely to offer an opinion on a fictitious issue when the question was asked without an explicit filter (Forms B and C) than when it was asked with one (Form A). And they were even more likely to offer an opinion on the unfiltered form when "don't know" responses were probed (Form C) than when they were not (Form B). This pattern occurred on all three of the issues, and in both surveys. 10

Notice, however, that respondents were generally more likely to offer opinions on both the Agricultural Trade Act and the Monetary Control Bill than they were on the Public Affairs Act, probably because they were more likely to confuse the former topics with subjects with which they were familiar, such as the questions we asked about trade with the Soviet Union and government spending (see Appendix). People can thus be more easily manipulated into giving opinions on subjects which seem at least faintly familiar than those which do not.

EFFECTS OF WILLINGNESS TO ADMIT IGNORANCE

We found little or no relationship between an individual's willingness to admit ignorance and his or her tendency to offer opinions on

⁸ The response rate for this Greater Cincinnati Survey was 71.3 percent. The refusal rate was 14.8 percent. The rest consisted of partially completed interviews (2.8 percent) and potential interviews that were not completed because of a language barrier, a hearing problem, illiteracy, senility, or physical illness (5.6 percent) or because the selected respondent was away on vacation, a business trip, or avoided an appointment for some other reason (5.5 percent).

⁹ Because there were no significant differences in responses to the fictitious issues, in either of the two surveys, when the questions were asked before or after the nonfictitious issues (data not shown here), we have combined the data for these two context conditions in constructing Table 1.

¹⁰ The differences between Forms B and C tend to be somewhat greater in the May/ June 1984 survey, especially on the Public Affairs Act, indicating that the interviewers may have pressured respondents more heavily and consistently, perhaps because of greater emphasis in training for this survey on how to probe respondents who give "don't know" responses.

	Filtered	Unfiltered			
	Form A (DK's Not Probed)	Form B (DK's Not Probed)	Form C (DK's Probed)		
Public Affairs Act	3.7	24.3	31.5		
(Nov./Dec., 1983) ^a	(408)	(395)	(399)		
Public Affairs Act	3.6	22.2	42.3		
(May/June, 1984) ^b	(397)	(411)	(402)		
Agricultural Trade Act	12.1	38.9	49.0		
(Nov./Dec., 1983) ^c	(405)	(399)	(398)		
Agricultural Trade Act	10.5	35.5	Š5.9		
(May/June, 1984) ^d	(398)	(411)	(403)		
Monetary Control Bill	13.2	33.7	46.3		
(Nov./Dec., 1983) ^e	(408)	(397)	(397)		
Monetary Control Bill	14.3	38.4	54.7		
(May/June, 1984) ^f	(398)	(411)	(404)		

Table 1. Percent with Opinion on Public Affairs Act, Agricultural Trade Act, and Monetary Control Bill by Question Form and Survey

fictitious issues, regardless of the form in which the questions were asked (data not shown here). ¹¹ The failure to find such a relationship does not, however, mean that the dispositional hypothesis can be discarded because the measure we used was admittedly a rather weak one, based on a single item, the responses to which were highly skewed: over 90 percent of the respondents in the first survey, and nearly 90 in the second, said they don't at all mind admitting it when they "don't know" something. So there was little or no variance in the item, and therefore little opportunity for it to differentiate between respondents who give opinions on fictitious issues and those who do not. Perhaps, then, a better measure, or set of measures, of a person's willingness to admit ignorance would result in a different conclusion.

^a Form A vs. B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 106.05$, df=2, p < .0001 (Form B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 4.86$, df=1, p < .03).

^b Form A vs. B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 171.01$, df = 2, p < .0001 (Form B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 36.93$, df = 1, p < .0001).

[°] Form A vs. B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 130.21$, df=2, $\rho < .0001$ (Form B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 7.91$, df=1, $\rho < .01$).

d Form A vs. B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 183.33$, df=2, $\rho < .0001$ (Form B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 33.02$, df=1,

Point A vs. B vs. C; $\chi = 103.35$, dt = 2, p < .0001 (Form B vs. C; $\chi = 33.02$, dt = 1, p < .0001).

Form A vs. B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 104.05$, df = 2, p < .0001 (Form B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 12.57$, df = 1,

p < .001). Form A vs. B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 143.68$, df=2, p < .0001 (Form B vs. C: $\chi^2 = 21.00$, df=1, p < .0001).

¹¹ Nor did we find any significant relationship, in either study, between a respondent's score on an overall index of social desirability—formed by summing responses to all five of the Marlowe-Crowne items—and his or her response to any of the fictitious issues (data not shown).

Table 2. Percent with Opinion on Public Affairs Act, Agricultural Trade Act, and the						
Monetary Control Bill by Race, by Education, by Question Form (Fali 1983 and Spring						
1984 Surveys Combined)						

	Filtered Form (A)				Unfiltered Forms (B & C Combined)			
	Better Educated		Less Well Educated		Better Educated		Less Well Educated	
	Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites
Public Affairs Acta	4.0 (50)	5.0 (299)	4.2 (71)	2.2 (368)	41.5 (82)	22.1 (633)	52.2 (159)	30.9 (706)
Agricultural Trade Actb	, ,	11.4 (297)	4.3 (70)	12.2 (369)	51.8 (83)	38.4 (635)	59.0 (156)	46.5 (710)
Monetary Control Bille	16.0 (50)	18.5 (298)	16.9 (71)	9.5 (370)	56.6 (83)	40.8 (633)	59.5 (158)	40.5 (709)

Note: Better educated = some college or more; less well-educated = high school education or less.

EFFECTS OF RACE AND EDUCATION

As expected from previous research, both race and education had a significant influence on responses to the fictitious issues, depending upon the form in which the questions were asked (see Table 2). On the filtered form (A), the differences between blacks and whites, and between the better educated and the less well educated, were not statistically significant on any of the three times. Most respondents, in fact, regardless of their race or education, said they hadn't thought much about any of the fictitious issues when asked about them. On the unfiltered form, however, the differences between groups were sizable as well as statistically significant. Blacks offered opinions on all three issues significantly more often than whites, whether they were better educated or not. Notice, too, that education had an independent effect, particularly on responses to the Public Affairs Act: the less well educated offered opinions on the issues more often than the better educated, whether they were black or white. But the effects of educa-

^a Differences on filtered form *not* statistically significant. Differences on unfiltered forms: better educated blacks vs. whites ($\chi^2 = 13.72$, df = 1, p < .001); less well-educated blacks vs. whites ($\chi^2 = 25.07$, df = 1, p < .0001).

b Differences on filtered form *not* statistically significant. Differences on unfiltered forms: better educated blacks vs. whites $(\chi^2 = 4.93, df = 1, p < .03)$; less well-educated blacks vs. whites $(\chi^2 = 7.50, df = 1, p < .01)$.

^c Differences on filtered form *not* statistically significant. Differences on unfiltered forms: better educated blacks vs. whites $(\chi^2 = 6.92, df = 1, p < .01)$; less well-educated blacks vs. whites $(\chi^2 = 18.20, df = 1, p < .0001)$.

¹² Because of small cell sizes in the black subsample, the data for the two surveys have been combined and education has been collapsed into two categories, an admittedly crude control, but inescapable under the circumstances.

tion were not as strong as those of race; in fact, on the Monetary Control Bill, there was no significant difference in response by education when race was held constant. Race is thus the more important of the two.¹³

Conclusion

The findings suggest that people give opinions on fictitious issues, in large part, because of the pressure to answer which is created by the form in which the questions are asked and the manner in which the "don't know" responses are handled by the interviewer. The data also indicate that people can be more easily pressured into giving an opinion on a fictitious issue when the topic seems familiar to them (e.g., agricultural trade), probably because they confuse it with a related subject on which they do have an opinion. The more a person knows about a subject, however (e.g., politics, sports), the less likely he or she is to make such a mistake; in fact, the more they know about the subject, the more easily they can recognize what is familiar and what is not (e.g., a fictional politician or baseball team). Blacks and less welleducated respondents may thus be more likely to offer opinions on fictitious issues because they are generally less well informed about politics and therefore less able to tell whether the topic is something that "belongs." As a general principle, then, we would hypothesize that the less knowledgeable a person is about a given subject, the more easily he or she can be confused and pressured to give an opinion about it. Such are the "demand characteristics" of the survey interview.

What are the implications of these findings for the practice of probing? Surely we should not pressure people to give opinions when they plead ignorance. Most of the problem can, in fact, be avoided by giving respondents an explicit opportunity to say they have "no opinion" on the subject—for example, by using a filter question. But on many public affairs issues this will mean losing 20 to 25 percent of the cases for the analysis (see Bishop et al., 1983; Schuman and Presser, 1981:

¹³ We also discovered that, with the exception of the Public Affairs Act, men were somewhat more likely than women to offer opinions on the fictitious issues on both the filtered and unfiltered forms, but the differences were relatively small—less than 10 percent on the average (data not shown). Younger people were significantly more likely than older people to give opinions on the Monetary Control Bill when the question was asked in unfiltered form, but other than that there were no significant differences among age groups.

¹⁴ We have found in a previous survey, for example, that blacks are significantly less likely than whites to know the names of their United States senators, the length of a senator's term of office, and which political party has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives (data not presented here).

Ch. 4). That, for many pollsters, however, may be too big a price to pay in the loss of representativeness. Nor does it make good copy to say that many people have no opinion on the issues of the day. The alternative is to create a spurious form of representativeness by minimizing the "don't knows." Perhaps we should stop probing altogether, except to ask respondents what they mean when they say "I don't know." For probing presumes that the respondent has an opinion on the issue that merely needs to be drawn out. Yet, how can we ever know that in advance? Is it not time, then, that we reexamined the practice of probing in public opinion surveys? And with it, the meaning of what we so routinely record as "DK."

Appendix

WORDING OF THE QUESTIONS ON FICTITIOUS AND NONFICTITIOUS ISSUES

Form A

Some people feel that The 1975 Public Affairs Act should be repealed—do you agree or disagree with this idea, or haven't you thought much about this issue?

Congress has been considering *The Agricultural Trade Act of 1984*—do you favor or oppose the passage of this act, or haven't you thought much about this issue?

Congress has also been considering *The Monetary Control Bill of 1984*—do you favor or oppose the passage of this bill, or haven't you thought much about this issue?

- ... Do you think the government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and private businesses, do you think the government should do even more to solve our country's problems, or haven't you thought much about this issue?
- ... Do you think the United States should do more trading and business with the Soviet Union, do you feel that the United States should cut back on its economic ties with the Soviet Union, or haven't you thought much about this issue?

Forms B and C

Some people feel that *The 1975 Public Affairs Act* should be repealed—do you agree or disagree with this idea?

Congress has been considering *The Agricultural Trade Act of 1984*—do you favor or oppose the passage of this act?

Congress has also been considering *The Monetary Control Bill of 1984*—do you favor or oppose the passage of this bill?

- ... Do you think the government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and private businesses, or do you think the government should do even more to solve our country's problems?
- ... Do you think the United States should do more trading and business with the Soviet Union, or do you feel that the United States should cut back on its economic ties with the Soviet Union?

Form A (cont.)

Forms B and C (cont.)

... Do you think the federal government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending, do you feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending, or haven't you thought much about this issue?

... Do you think the federal government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending, or do you feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending?

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