Public opinion without opinions? Item nonresponse and (the absence of) substantive opinions in public opinion surveys

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CHAPTER 7

The Follow-Up Question

7.1 Introduction

Suppose that public opinion about nuclear energy is assessed with a survey, because it is a hotly debated topic. Respondents are asked whether they want a ban on nuclear energy or not. 30 percent of the respondents is against a ban and wants to permit the use and production of nuclear energy; 60 percent supports the ban. The remaining 10 percent did not give an opinion. It seems clear what the public wants: a majority of 60 percent wants to ban nuclear energy. This picture becomes even clearer when item nonresponse is excluded as missing data; in that case 67 percent supports the ban.

Suppose that the respondents were asked in a follow-up question whether they would be upset if their opinion did not prevail and 25 percent of the (total number of) respondents who previously indicated they supported the ban, say they would not be upset (i.e. gave a permissive opinion). The other 35 percent (of the initial majority of 60 percent) would be upset if nuclear energy was not banned. The public now seems more divided: 30 percent of the respondents does not want a ban on nuclear energy and wants to see it transformed into a policy, 35 percent does want a ban and wants this preference executed, and the remaining 35 percent either gave a nonresponse or said they would not be upset if their opinion did not prevail. The picture of public opinion has suddenly become much more blurred.

This may seem a far-fetched example, but earlier applications of this follow-up question in the US by Gallup (see Table 7.1) show that the problem is real. At least for some issues the public turned out to be more uncaring than suggested by a standard survey without a follow-up question. And if respondents do not care about what happens to their opinion, why should others, i.e. pollsters and politicians, do?

Despite the fact that 'public policy polls should be a boon in a governmental system where the people elect their representatives', due to various issues this democratic potential often is not utilized (Moore, 2011). Moore (2008, pp. 145-146; Moore, 2011) summarizes three main problems: 1) non-opinions are ignored and not measured by pollsters; 2) the 'intensity' of opinion is not assessed; and 3) no differentiation is made between so-called hypothetical and actual opinions.

This chapter is the third part in a series of survey experiments of a project about the effects of question design on survey outcomes and the relevance of these outcomes for the public debate and democratic process. In this third experiment opinions are taken as a given, but the way they may affect political decision-making is central, i.e. the extent to which people want politicians to be responsive to their opinion. The salience, 'weight' or 'intensity' of an opinion is taken into account. Rather than determining whether an opinion is present, which is an assessment of non-opinions analyzed in the previous chapters, here the respondent is asked

whether he or she cares about what happens with his or her opinion. The respondent did give an opinion, but so what? Note that this variant is strictly speaking not a measurement of item nonresponse, but primarily an indicator of the extent to which the respondent thinks that his or her opinion matters or should matter.

The experiment presented is inspired by Moore (2008) and in particular his follow-up question: 'Would you be upset if the previously expressed opinion did not prevail when the issue was ultimately decided?'. The follow-up question is supposed to measure the *'intensity of opinion'* (Moore, 2008, pp. 145-146). This question allows more variation in the spectrum of non-attitudes to 'real' attitudes and an assessment of 'real' politically relevant public opinion: the focus is on opinions that the people themselves want to see carried out. Whereas high levels of item nonresponse raise doubts about the existence of public opinion concerning a certain subject, the 'so what' follow-up question renders information about the weight and importance of individual opinions and public opinion as a whole.

The research question of the third survey experiment and this chapter is: *to what extent do people want their individual opinions to matter and/or to be translated into policy?* To what extent do respondents 'care about' their opinion? Is it a 'directive opinion', in which case they expect it to be executed (Traugott, 2009, p. 432)?

7.2 Theoretical Reflection

The question whether public opinion measured via polls is as valid and robust as often assumed, is not only relevant for item nonresponse. 'My view is that at important policy matters, pollsters should measure at least three dimensions of public opinion: 1) direction of support (from support to opposition), including the magnitude; 2) intensity of views; and 3) the absence of a meaningful view on the matter, or non-opinion' (Moore, 2009). The first and third aspect were discussed in previous chapters; in this chapter the second aspect is central. Moore labels this as *intensity,* although it arguably is not about the strength of the opinion as such but whether and how the individual opinion should be included in the decision-making process. The focus is not primarily on 'the strength of an individual's feelings about an attitude object', which would be a way to measure attitude intensity (Krosnick & Abelson, 1994, p. 179; see also Schuman & Presser, 1996), but on the preferred implications of this individual opinion.

Follow-up questions may gauge to what extent an expressed opinion is *'directive'* instead of *'permissive'* (Moore, 2008, pp. 6-7). According to Lyons (2004) directive opinions reveal a psychological investment; such an 'opinion can in some way be considered an order or a directive for public officials'. Respondents with directive

opinions want to see their preference transformed into policies. Permissive opinions, on the other hand, permit the decision-making to go either way. The respondent does not really or deeply care how the issue is ultimately decided. From this perspective, 'so what'-follow-up questions collect additional information about the importance and desired impact of individual opinions and public opinion as a whole. It should be noted that giving a 'not upset' answer to a follow-up question does not necessarily mean that the respondent does not care about how the issue is decided. A permissive opinion might also reflect a sense of reality, because politicians do not (always) listen to the public, or a sense of how democracy works when a majority holds a different view than the respondent's.

The main difference between directive and permissive opinions is in their intended effects: should policies reflect public opinion? 'Permissive opinions "permit" the country's leaders to do whatever the leaders deem best' whereas citizens with directive opinions want to see their opinions executed (Moore, 2004). In the latter case, the citizen likely has strong beliefs about the way an issue should be solved and the expressed opinion can be considered an 'order' which should be carried out (Lyons, 2004). Listening to what people want is at the core of representative democracy; surveys are the means to assess the public's wants and needs. The more qualified idea is, however, that responsive politicians do not have to listen to opinions if the people themselves do not care, even when they do express an opinion. In such a situation the decision-makers would have 'a great deal of latitude' (Moore, 2004).

So besides the question whether a large part of the public *has* an opinion about a subject, another but related important question is whether those citizens who are giving their opinion also want it to practically *matter*. The answer to this question is not obvious or clear. Moore (2008) presents examples of follow-up questions in which the respondent was asked whether s/he would be upset if the previously expressed opinion did not prevail when the issue was ultimately decided; other examples can be found on www.gallup.com. To illustrate the rather innovative follow-up question and provide context for the findings in this chapter, an overview of some of these American examples is presented in Table 7.1.

One example in Table 7.1 is the Pledge of Allegiance, which refers to a decision in 2004 by the US Supreme Court on whether the words 'under God' should be removed from the Pledge, as the pledge was originally worded before 1954. In the preceding months, Gallup polled what the decision should be. The outcome was clear: 91 percent thought the words 'under God' should remain part of the pledge (the percentages of 78 plus 13 percent 'Keep' in Table 7.1. This is a very clear majority preference. The majority preference remained when a distinction was made between permissive and directive opinions: a large majority of 78 percent had

Table 7.1: Previous Application of Follow-up Questions by Gallup

Subject and Data Collection	Question wording	Directive	Permissive	
			No Opinion or Unsure	*Not upset*
War with Iraq *17-19 February 2003*	'Would you favor or oppose sending American ground troops to the Persian Gulf in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq?'	59% 29% Favor; 30% Oppose	3% No Opinion	38% 30% Favor; 8% Oppose
Pledge of allegiance *26-28 March 2004*	'As you may know, the Supreme Court is considering whether the Pledge of Allegiance should continue to include the words "under God" as part of the pledge. Which would you prefer?'	81% 78% Keep; 3% Remove		19% 13% Keep; 5% Remove
Anti-missile defense system *22-24 April 2002*	'Do you think the government should or should not spend the money that would be necessary to build [a defense system against nuclear missiles]?'	42% 29% Favor; 13% Oppose	6% Unsure	53% 35% Favor; 17% Oppose
Privatization of social security *8-11 April 2002*	'A proposal has been made that would allow people to cut a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts that would be invested in private stocks and bonds. Do you favor or oppose this proposal?'	47% 27% Favor; 20% Oppose	4% No Opinion	49% 36% Favor; 13% Oppose
Defense spending: development missile defense shield *4-6 February 2002*	'... Do you think we are spending too little, about the right amount, or too much?'	41% 28% Favor; 13% Oppose	33% No Opinion	26% 19% Favor; 7% Oppose
Follow-up defense spending: missile defense shield *3-6 February 2003*	'Should the United States spend the money to develop a missile defense system?'	44% 28% Favor; 16% Oppose	33% Unsure	23% 18% Favor; 5% Oppose

Table 7.1: Continued

Subject and Data Collection	Question wording	Directive	*Permissive*	
			No Opinion or Unsure	**Not upset**
Kyoto agreement *8-11 March 2004*	'... Should the US agree to abide by the provisions of the Kyoto agreement on global warming?'	40% 30% Favor; 10% Oppose	36% No Opinion	24% 12% Favor; 12% Oppose
Oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge *7-10 March 2005*	'Do you think the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska should or should not be opened up for oil exploration?'	64% 19% Should 45% Should Not	5% No Opinion	31% 23% Should; 8% Should Not
Closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay *6-8 July 2007*	'Do you think the US should – or should not – close the prison at the Guantanamo Bay military base in Cuba?'	47% 19% Favor 28% Oppose	13% DK or Unsure	39% 14% Favor; 25% Oppose

Sources: (Carlson, 2002; Lyons, 2004; Moore, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2008).
Note: a *directive* opinion is one where respondents explicitly indicated that they 'would be upset if the issue was not resolved to their liking' (Carlson, 2002). The column first summarizes the total number of directive opinions for each subject without their actual preference. After that, the percentage of directive opinions in favor and opposing the statement are indicated (in the same cell). A *permissive* opinion is one where respondents indicate they are not (too) upset or did not give an opinion at all. Thus, the item nonresponse combined with non-upset respondents are grouped into the permissive category.

a directive opinion of keeping the words. Furthermore, only 19 percent said they would not be upset if the issue was decided otherwise or did not give an opinion, which is a low percentage of permissive opinions. Consequently, whichever way these opinions were measured, the resulting overall picture of public opinion remained the same.

The experiment reported here will examine whether the outcome of a survey, executed with an internet panel in the Netherlands, is affected by the use of a follow-up question. A follow-up question could affect the outcome in various ways. First, no majority may support either side strongly, because many respondents gave a permissive opinion; the majority favoring sending American ground troops to the Persian Gulf disappears when the distinction between permissive and directive opinions is introduced (see Table 7.1). Secondly, the substantive outcome may change;

a plurality opposing the sending of ground troops with a directive opinion, when at first sight it seemed like a majority was in favor of it when the distinction between permissive and directive opinions was not included. This second consequence means that a different overall picture of public opinion emerges.

7.3 Expectations

The hypotheses used for the other two experiments referred specifically to non-substantive answers and the overall distribution of opinions. This chapter is about a slightly different topic, which is why new expectations will be developed which are tailored to the measurement of directive opinions with a follow-up question. They focus on two main points: 1) the number of permissive and directive opinions, both in general and for specific subjects; and 2) the resulting picture of public opinion, both including and excluding permissive opinions. Note, however, that these expectations have less ground in the literature, because the follow-up question has not been conceptualized and analysed as much as non-substantive response options. So only a number of more general expectations have been developed to guide the discussion and analysis of the effect of a follow-up question.

The first expectation makes a distinction between nonresponse and 'not upset'. The expectation is that for issues generating relatively much item nonresponse, the number of directive opinions is relatively low; item nonresponse and the 'directiveness' of opinions are expected to be negatively correlated since both the number of 'not upset' opinions and item nonresponse are assumed to be indicators of whether respondents care about an issue. Item nonresponse and 'not upset' answers are both treated as permissive opinions, but the expectation differentiates between these two permissive opinion categories.

The expectation (E1a and E1b) is that survey questions with higher item nonresponse rates have a relatively low proportion of directive opinions. When item nonresponse is included as permissive opinions, this expectation (E1a) is rather obvious or even tautological: questions with more item nonresponse by definition result in less directive opinions. Respondents using a non-substantive response option are not asked the follow-up question and therefore fewer people can indicate that they have a directive opinion. If 30 percent of the respondents use a non-substantive response option, only the remaining 70 percent can say whether their opinion is permissive or directive.

Even with item nonresponse excluded, however, the expectation is that items with relatively high item nonresponse rates also have fewer directive and subsequently more permissive opinions. Item nonresponse may be one indicator of public

ignorance and whether people care about the issue; the 'upsetness' or 'directiveness' of opinions may be considered another indicator of whether respondents care about the issue. The expectation is therefore that both including and excluding nonresponse (as part of the permissive opinions), more item nonresponse correlates with less directive opinions.

E1a: The more item nonresponse is measured, fewer directive opinions are measured (with item nonresponse included).

E1b: The more item nonresponse is measured, fewer directive opinions are measured (without item nonresponse).

Next, three expectations are developed about directive opinions and question content. Building on the idea that people do not have opinions about everything, but that there may be some core dimensions which organize their attitudes and are central to public and political debate (McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Wittkopf, 1990), the expectation is that issues related to core dimensions (in Dutch politics) result in more directive opinions. Furthermore, it is expected that in abstract or technical issues like foreign policy, opinions are less directive, since they are supposed to be less coherent, less stable and less informed (Alvarez & Brehm, 2002, p. 214; Everts, 2008, pp. 8-14).

E2a: If the topic of a survey question is related to a major political dimension, the number of directive opinions is higher compared to a survey question that is not related to such a dimension.

E2b: The number of directive opinions for questions about foreign policy issues is lower than for questions about issues related to the core dimensions.

Expectations E1a, E1b, E2a and E2b focus on the number of directive and permissive opinions while ignoring the substantive opinions. For the overall picture of public opinion, however, it is crucial to look at what the public wants in terms of the majority or plurality preference and not only whether respondents care about their opinion. The question is whether majorities or pluralities change or disappear when the distinction between directive and permissive opinions is taken into account.

E3: The use of a follow-up question affects the substantive distribution of opinions.

7.4 Data and Methods

The experiment is an internet survey experiment with respondents of the Team Vier internet panel. It was executed with a split sample design. Six subgroups were randomly selected from the panel and subjected to one particular question design. Respondents were randomly assigned to a group, so it can be assumed that the groups are similar; differences in response patterns result from question form, i.e. the possibilities to register non-substantive answers. The use of a follow-up question was not varied: this question was asked *after* a substantive answer was given to the opinion question and does not affect the substantive answer. The analysis presented here focuses on the impact of the follow-up question.

The general instruction of the block of questions read that respondents were asked to give their opinion on various issues. The order of the blocks of questions was randomized to avoid question-order effects. Scales for self-placement were placed horizontally on the screen while the answer categories of the other options were ranked vertically, which was consistent with the way they were originally offered. The experiment was fielded between July 24th and August 7th, 2012; respondents had two weeks to complete the questionnaire. Five general themes were addressed and each theme included three questions of which at least one question came from existing research – see section 4.4 for more information about issue selection.

Table 7.2 shows some descriptive statistics of the sample and subgroups. The sample is not representative of the population. Women are, for example, overrepresented: on average, 63.7 percent of the sample was female. The Team Vier internet panel is a nonprobability online panel, which is not a randomly drawn sample. Generalization is not possible. It is, however, possible to produce internally valid findings and explore causal mechanisms, due to the between-subjects-design and the resulting similarity of the subgroups. No significant differences were found between the variants in terms of gender, age and region of the respondent. These results confirm that the subgroups are similar and that any differences in the outcome can be attributed to the variant to which the respondent was assigned.

Table 7.2: Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Characteristics

		1A	1B	1C	2A	2B	2C	Total
Gender*	Male	35.1%	37.8%	39.2%	35.5%	35.2%	34.9%	36.3%
	Female	64.9%	62.2%	60.8%	64.5%	64.8%	65.1%	63.7%
Age (years)*	Mean	53.8	52.4	53.9	54.8	54.6	54.2	53.9
	SD	12.4	12.5	12.8	12.2	11.1	12.8	12.3
Region*	3Gem	19.5%	10.4%	14.8%	13.1%	13.2%	15.5%	14.4%
	Noord	14.3%	10.4%	10.8%	13.1%	12.8%	9.9%	11.9%
	Oost	19.9%	19.7%	17.6%	18.7%	19.6%	19.8%	19.2%
	West	25.5%	32.9%	30.8%	25.1%	34.4%	30.2%	29.8%
	Zuid	20.7%	26.5%	26.0%	29.9%	20.0%	24.6%	24.6%
N		251	249	250	251	250	252	1503

*No statistical significant differences between the subgroups at the .05 level

Table 7.3 displays the response rates of the respondents of the Team Vier internet panel participating in the survey experiment. The unit response rate is unknown, since the survey was closed after the target of 250 respondents (for each subgroup) completing a variant was reached.

Table 7.3: Response Rates

Variant	Number of Respondents	Number of Items in Questionnaire			Average Item Nonresponse		
		Filter	Opinion	Follow-up	Filter	DK	Total
1A. No filter question, explicit DK	251		14	14	---	8.9%	8.9%
1B. No filter question, implicit DK	249		14	14	---	1.2%	1.2%
1C. No filter question, forced choice	250		14	14	---	---	---
2A. Filter question, explicit DK	251	13	14	14	16.3%	1.3%	18.4%
2B. Filter question, implicit DK	250	13	14	14	17.4%	0.3%	18.7%
2C. Filter question, forced choice	252	13	14	14	18.9%	---	18.9%
Total	1503						

Average Item Nonresponse Filter indicates the use of the 13 filter questions; Average Item Nonresponse DK shows the average use of the DK option; and Average Item Nonresponse Total combines both categories for item nonresponse.

The average item nonresponse rates[39] (see Table 7.3) indicate that it matters how non-substantive response options are offered. A 10-percentage point difference shows between all filter variants and the explicit DK variant in the level of average item nonresponse. Including a filter question clearly and significantly increases item nonresponse. Secondly, almost no use is made of the implicit DK option where respondents can skip the question if they do not want to or cannot answer. Thirdly, the average item nonresponse shows that the explicit DK option was rarely used after a filter question was asked: in variant 2A the percentage of item nonresponse registered by the DK option is 1.3 percent. There are only small differences between the variants using a filter question. Furthermore, the difference in total average item nonresponse between the filter variants 2A, 2B and 2C is statistically non-significant in a t-test.

As said, the focus here is on the follow-up or 'so what' question. How 'upset' are citizens if their opinion is ignored or does not prevail when the particular issue is decided? Furthermore, the use of a filter question and/or an (explicit) DK option for some versions shows whether and how item nonresponse is related to these differences. Table 7.4 shows the six versions of the questions/questionnaire (see Appendix AIII for the complete questionnaires).

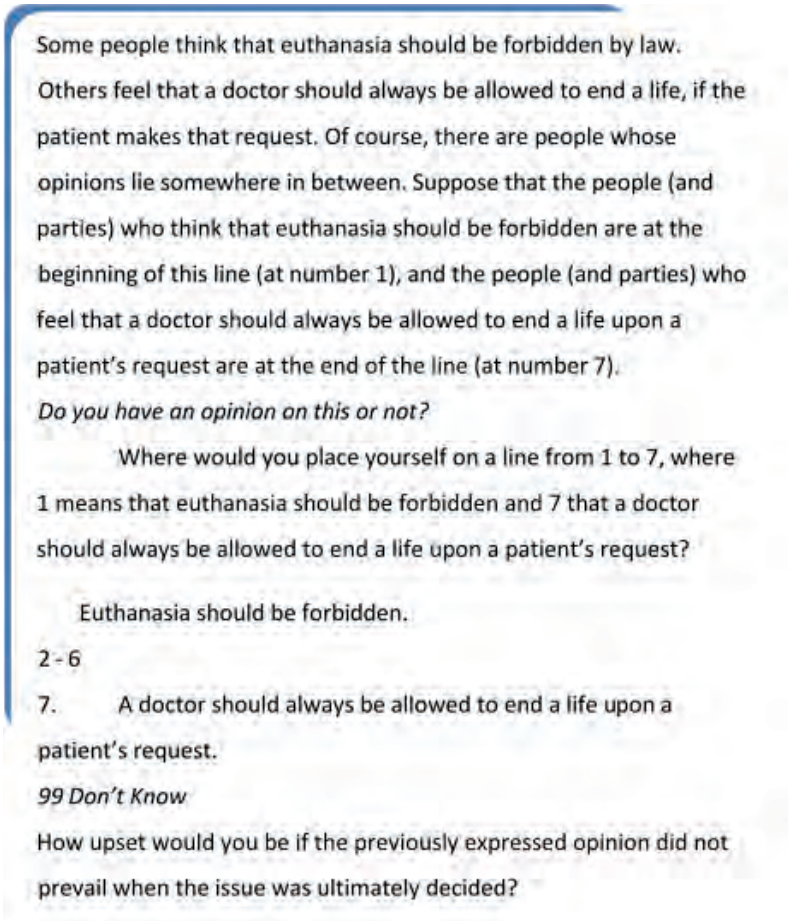
Table 7.4: Experimental Conditions and Safety Nets for Item Nonresponse

	Explicit DK	**Implicit DK**	**Forced choice**
No filter	1A: answer DK	1B: skip question	1C: no safety net, answer obligatory
Weak filter	2A: 'no' to filter question or answer DK	2B: 'no' to filter question or skip question	2C: 'no' to filter question

All respondents who gave a substantive answer were asked a follow-up question: how upset would you be if the previously expressed opinion did not prevail?
In Dutch: 'Hoe erg zou u het vinden als uw mening over [beschrijving onderwerp voorgaande vraag] niet door de politiek in beleid wordt omgezet?'

39 The item nonresponse and distribution of opinions of this survey experiment are examined further in the next (comparative) chapter. Here, the aim is simply to set some parameters for the discussion in the current chapter.

An example of a particular question from this survey is given in Figure 7.1 (for the euthanasia self-placement item). The parts in italics vary according to the variant the respondent is subjected to. (For a complete list of the questions and variations, see Appendix AIII).


Some people think that euthanasia should be forbidden by law. Others feel that a doctor should always be allowed to end a life, if the patient makes that request. Of course, there are people whose opinions lie somewhere in between. Suppose that the people (and parties) who think that euthanasia should be forbidden are at the beginning of this line (at number 1), and the people (and parties) who feel that a doctor should always be allowed to end a life upon a patient's request are at the end of the line (at number 7).

Do you have an opinion on this or not?

Where would you place yourself on a line from 1 to 7, where 1 means that euthanasia should be forbidden and 7 that a doctor should always be allowed to end a life upon a patient's request?

Euthanasia should be forbidden.

2 - 6

7. A doctor should always be allowed to end a life upon a patient's request.

99 Don't Know

How upset would you be if the previously expressed opinion did not prevail when the issue was ultimately decided?

Figure 7.1: Survey Question Variations

7.5 Results

To what extent want survey respondents their opinion to matter and/or translated into policy? One indirect and implicit way to answer this question is to look at item nonresponse. Another, more direct approach is based on Moore's follow-up question. This follow-up question is intended to gauge or measure the intent of opinions: does the respondent want to see the opinion translated into policy? The opinions are distinguished in two categories: *directive*, in which case the respondent wishes or expects his/her given opinion to be executed, and *permissive* which "permits" the country's leaders to do with the information provided by the respondents whatever they deem best. Permissive opinions include item nonresponse; item nonresponse does not contribute to public opinion and gives the leaders the full discretion to decide themselves what should be done.

The follow-up question applied is reminiscent to the format that was used by Moore (2004, 2005) and Carlson (2002). Rather than asking 'Would you be upset...?' as was the case for most applications of the follow-up question, the question here is 'How upset would you be if the previously expressed opinion did not prevail when the issue was ultimately decided?'. The respondents could give an answer on a four-point scale without a non-substantive response option; very upset, upset, not very upset, not upset at all. The scale offers a wider range to answer the question instead of being forced to answer yes or no.

Two questions are addressed in the analysis: 1) What part of the public gives a directive opinion – in general and regarding specific subjects; and 2) How does this impact on the resulting picture of public opinion? The first question looks at the number of non-opinions resulting from non-substantive response options, i.e. the filter question and the DK option, and the number of 'not upset' permissive opinions. The second question looks at the overall distribution of opinions, both excluding the distinction between directive and permissive opinions and including such information in the full distribution.

7.5.1 Permissive and Directive Opinions

How many answers to survey questions are directive, i.e. opinions the respondents want to see translated into policies? And how is item nonresponse resulting from the various non-substantive response options related to the number of permissive and directive opinions? Previous research by Moore (2008) found that at least 40 percent of the respondents gave a non-directive (permissive) response, i.e. either a nonresponse or an answer indicating that the respondent would not be upset if the issue was decided otherwise. The aggregated results (in Figure 7.2) show a lower number: 61 to 68 percent of the respondents gave a directive opinion ('upset' or

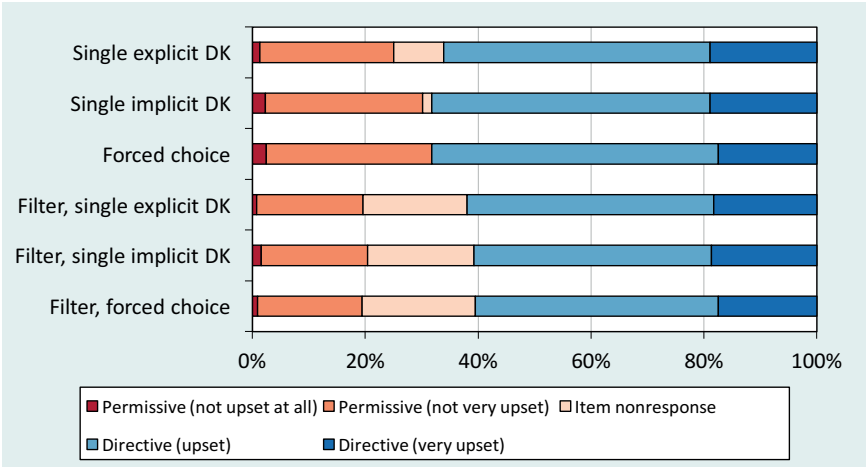


Figure 7.2: Average Rate Directive and Permissive Opinions (%)

'very upset') and the remaining 39 to 32 percent expressed a permissive opinion. The average rate of permissive opinions never exceeds 40 percent.

The first expectation differentiates between the two types of permissive opinions: item nonresponse and 'not (very) upset' answers to the follow-up question. It was expected that questions with more item nonresponse would result in less directive opinions, both including (E1a) and excluding (E1b) item nonresponse. When item nonresponse is included, the range of permissive opinions is 32 to 39 percent. This variation can primarily be attributed to item nonresponse, which varies between 0 (in non-filter forced choice variant 1c) and 20 percent (in filter forced choice variant 2c). The variants with the lowest item nonresponse (single implicit DK and forced choice) are also the variants with the lowest total percentage of permissive opinions (including item nonresponse) and consequently the highest percentage of directive opinions. The same is true for variants with high item nonresponse rates[40]: filter variants 2a, 2b and 2c result in the least directive opinions. The expectation that items with a higher item nonresponse rate result in less directive opinions when item nonresponse is included in the outcome (as formulated in expectation E1a) is supported.

40 Surprisingly, the variant with a filter question and an explicit DK option does not result in the highest item nonresponse rate. Variant 2c, which only offers a filter question as a nonresponse option, renders 20 percent item nonresponse (as compared to 18 percent in variant 2a). A possible explanation is that respondents of variant 2c found out that a filter question was their only way of not giving a substantive answer and therefore used the filter question sooner for subsequent survey questions (without looking at the actual opinion question).

Even without item nonresponse, the expectation was (E1b) that items with relatively high item nonresponse results in fewer '(very) upset' answers to the follow-up question. The average number of directive (upset) and permissive (not upset) opinions, excluding item nonresponse as missing data, is shown in Figure 7.3.

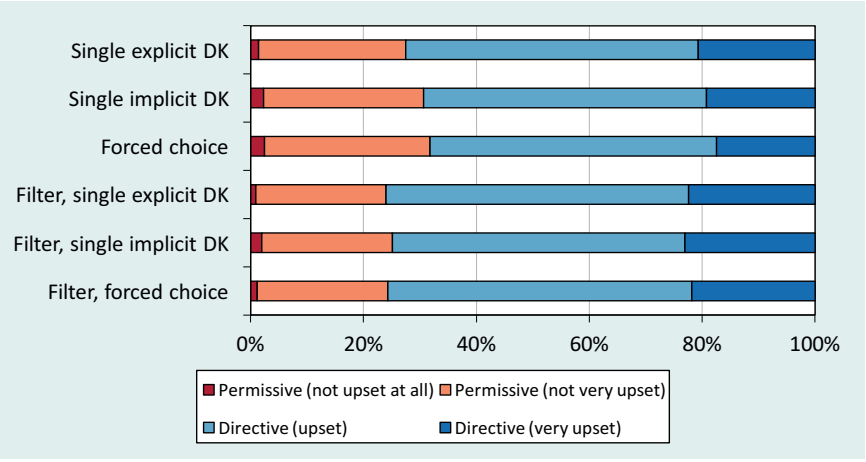


Figure 7.3: Average Rate Directive and Permissive Opinions (%) – Excluding Item Nonresponse

The question is: do variants with a higher average item nonresponse rate result in less directive opinions (as expected in E1b)? The answer is no. The pattern goes in the opposite direction: variants with the lowest average item nonresponse rates (forced choice and single implicit DK) result in 68 and 69 percent directive opinions whereas variants with the highest item nonresponse rates (the forced choice variants) result in 75 to 76 percent directive opinions (see Figure 7.3). The variants with a higher average item nonresponse rate thus result in *more* directive opinions; expectation E1b is rejected.

Table 7.5 shows the percentage of directive opinions for all individual survey questions[41], to move beyond general relations into an in-depth examination of whether respondents care about the answers for various topics they give in surveys.

41 The percentage of directive opinions consists of the 'very upset' and 'upset' answers to the question. Together with item nonresponse and other permissive opinions, i.e. 'not upset at all' or 'not very upset', these answers make up 100 percent. An additional analysis excluding item nonresponse can be found in , in order to examine the relation between item nonresponse and the number of directive opinions.

Table 7.5: Directive Opinions (%) Individual Survey Questions

Issue		1A: single explicit DK	1B: single implicit DK	1C: forced choice	2A: filter single explicit	2B: filter single implicit	2C: filter forced choice
Self-Placement Income Differences	Very Upset	16	13	15	15	16	17
	Upset	56	58	52	54	48	44
The welfare benefits should be lowered in order to stimulate people to work	Very Upset	19	20	16	18	19	15
	Upset	51	51	57	46	46	46
Self-Placement Euthanasia	Very Upset	28	27	31	31	34	32
	Upset	57	57	52	50	48	47
Adoption by same-sex couples should be possible	Very Upset	16	17	17	17	19	17
	Upset	48	48	48	42	38	37
Self-Placement Foreigners	Very Upset	19	20	14	18	16	15
	Upset	57	55	60	55	55	55
There are too many people of a non-Dutch nationality living in the Netherlands	Very Upset	12	15	14	16	15	16
	Upset	50	50	50	46	46	48
Self-Placement EU	Very Upset	12	15	14	16	15	16
	Upset	50	50	50	46	46	48
The Netherlands should spend more money on developmental aid	Very Upset	18	20	18	22	22	18
	Upset	47	44	52	46	44	52
The use of softdrugs should be completely prohibited	Very Upset	19	18	14	14	12	12
	Upset	39	47	47	36	38	33
'Establishing a 'Weed Permit' is a good idea'	Very Upset	14	15	10	10	11	12
	Upset	34	44	46	32	31	33
Powers EU	Very Upset	15	13	12	10	12	12
	Upset	45	53	57	45	40	48
'The Nederlands should abolish the mortgage interest deduction completely'	Very Upset	31	32	29	31	33	25
	Upset	44	41	47	42	40	44
'I want the Burqa Ban to proceed'	Very Upset	27	26	27	26	26	25
	Upset	44	40	38	38	36	37
'NATO should intervene in Syria'	Very Upset	13	12	14	12	8	13
	Upset	39	49	51	31	31	33
N		*251*	*249*	*250*	*251*	*250*	*252*

As said, it was found previously that the number of permissive opinions would amount to at least 40 percent, the remaining 60 percent or less of the respondents giving a directive opinion. This proves to be incorrect for the individual replicated scientific questions: the lowest number of directive opinions was 62 percent (variant 1A; Nationality), 65 percent in 1B and 64 percent in 1C. In the variants where a filter question was used (2A, 2B and 2C) the numbers are slightly lower, with the lowest number of directive opinions between 54 and 59 percent. All other survey questions generate over 60 percent 'upset' and 'very upset' directive opinions.

The results for the current affairs questions are more mixed. 73 percent of the respondents would on average be (very) upset if their opinion about mortgage interest deduction did not prevail when the issue was to be decided. The weed permit question, on the other hand, addresses an issue for which only a minority (in variants 1A, 2A, 2B and 2C) would be (very) upset if the outcome was different than their personal preferred option. The weed permit was an attempt (in 2012) to regulate the admission to 'coffeeshops' in the Netherlands to prevent problems caused by drug tourism; only people with a Dutch passport who had applied for a permit would be allowed admission. The weed permit was abolished after a couple of months when problems with illegal trade were discovered (NOS, 2012; Willems, 2012). It turns out that for four variants this item results in relatively few directive opinions. In the other two variants, the issue with the least directive opinions is related to NATO intervention in Syria.

These results reveal some differences in the percentage of directive opinions for individual items; the influence of the content of the questions on the percentage of directive opinions is examined below. The results in Table 7.5 do show that at least for some issues a majority does not express a directive opinion. This may have consequences for the overall picture of public opinion (as examined in the next section). A final point to notice is that the 'very upset' response is usually used by less than 20 percent of the respondents; only the questions about euthanasia, mortgage interest deduction and a Burqa ban show 25 to 32 percent 'very upset' directive opinions. Whether this can be attributed to question content will be discussed in the next section.

7.5.2 Directive Opinions and Question Content

Does the content of the individual survey questions matter? Several expectations were formulated based on whether a survey question appeals to the core dimensions of Dutch politics, in which case the number of directive opinions was expected to be relatively high, and whether an issue was related to foreign policy, in which case the number of directive opinions was expected to be lower. Table 7.6 shows the percentage of directive opinions for all questions grouped by content or theme.

Table 7.6: Directive Opinions (%) and Question Content

Theme	Question subject	1A: single explicit DK	1B: single implicit DK	1C: forced choice	2A: filter single explicit	2B: filter single implicit	2C: filter forced choice
Socio-economic	Self-placement income	72	71	67	69	64	61
	Welfare benefits	70	71	73	64	65	61
	Mortgage interest deduction	75	73	76	73	73	69
Ethical	Self-placement euthanasia	85	84	83	81	82	79
	Adoption same-sex	64	65	65	59	57	54
	Softdrugs	58	65	61	50	50	45
	Weed permit	48	59	56	42	42	45
Multicultural	Self-placement foreigners	76	75	74	73	71	70
	Nationality	62	65	64	62	61	64
	Burqa ban	71	66	65	64	62	62
Foreign policy	Self-placement EU	62	65	64	62	61	64
	Development aid	65	64	70	68	66	70
	Powers EU	60	66	69	55	52	60
	NATO in Syria	52	61	65	43	39	46

For most questions related to a major political dimension, the number of directive opinions is relatively high. The abolishment of the mortgage interest deduction (in the socio-economic sphere), for instance, has 69 to 76 percent of the respondents saying they would be (very) upset if their opinion did not prevail. With respect to euthanasia, 79 to 85 percent (depending on the questionnaire variant) express a directive opinion. These results support expectation E2a, but not all items related to a major political dimension show an equal high rate of directive opinions. The 'weed permit' is an item with relatively few directive opinions; in some variants only a minority of the respondents indicate they would be (very) upset if their opinion did not prevail.

The second expectation regarding question content (E2b) was that questions about foreign policy issues would render a relatively low number of directive opinions, because opinions about such issues are supposed to be less coherent, less stable and less informed. The four foreign policy questions (about the EU, development aid, the powers of the EU and the role of NATO in Syria) do result in relatively few directive opinions. These questions are all among the 7 (out of 14) questions with the lowest number of directive opinions. NATO's role in Syria is the foreign policy item with the least directive opinions: 39 to 65 percent, depending on

the questionnaire variant, which is the lowest percentage of directive opinions in two variants. So the general trend suggests a relation between issue content and the number of directive opinions, with questions related to a major political dimension resulting in more and questions related to foreign policy resulting in less directive opinions, as expected in E2a and E2b.

How does question design affect the number of directive opinions? Since item nonresponse is considered a permissive opinion and item nonresponse is encouraged by offering explicit non-substantive response options, it is to be expected that variants with explicit non-substantive response options - i.e. a filter question or an explicit DK category – result in more permissive opinions. The number of permissive opinions is consistently higher for the variants including a filter question as compared to non-filter variants. Including an explicit DK option as a response category (in variant 1A), however, renders a mixed effect on permissive opinions; questions about foreign policy issues generally do result in more permissive opinions when an explicit DK option is offered as compared to the implicit DK and forced choice variants, but the same cannot be said for the other items. Furthermore, this effect for the foreign policy items does not show in the filter variants. So the use of a filter question does affect the number of permissive opinions for all issue themes, but no definite conclusions can be drawn about the effect of a DK option on the number of permissive opinions. The likely explanation for this conclusion is that the variant with an explicit DK option (1A) resulted in an average item nonresponse rate of 9 percent, whereas the filter variants (2A, 2B and 2C) resulted in 18 to 20 percent item nonresponse. Only the respondents with a substantive answer were asked the follow-up question and this means that less respondents of the filter variants answered the follow-up questions.

7.5.3 Distribution of Opinions – Towards Public Opinion

If a politician looks at a poll, what would s/he make of it? Acknowledging the possibility that some respondents do not report a directive opinion, which majority or plurality emerges? The question is whether majorities or pluralities change or disappear when a follow-up question is used by making a distinction between directive and permissive opinions.

The follow-up question could affect the distribution of opinions in two ways: 1) the substantive outcome preferred by a majority or plurality may change when only directive opinions are considered, resulting in a different overall picture of public opinion; and 2) the size of the majority changes and the public seems more divided (but the preferred outcome does not change). In fact, both effects occur, in varying degrees. All distributions of opinions can be found in Appendix C.

To start with the first effect: do majorities or pluralities change? For some items

in some variants the response option preferred by a majority changes to a different response option preferred by a plurality when permissive opinions are excluded. Figure 7.4 illustrates this point with the distribution of opinions for NATO in Syria. If no distinction is made between permissive and directive opinions, a majority of 54 percent of the forced choice respondents disagrees with the statement that NATO should intervene in Syria (displayed in Figure 7.4 as light blue and dark blue segments). When the permissive opinions are excluded, however, more respondents agree with the statement; 35 percent gave a directive 'agree' answer compared to 30 percent directive *disagreeing* opinions. This is an example of a changing picture of public opinion: the substantive outcome preferred by most respondents – either a majority or a plurality – changes when only directive opinions are considered as the relevant public opinion.

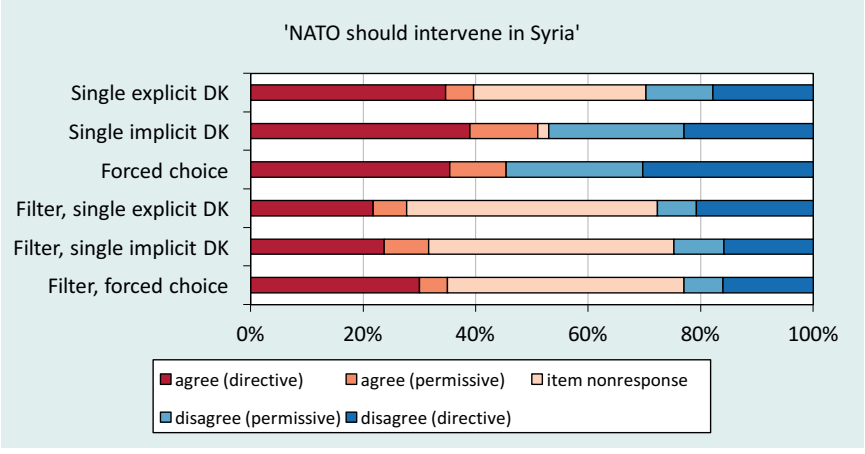


Figure 7.4: Distribution of Opinions NATO in Syria

The changing majority or plurality is arguably the effect of a follow-up question which has the most consequences for the outcome, because the majority preference is different when the distinction between permissive and directive opinions is made. The change from an option preferred by a majority to a different option preferred by a plurality happens on several occasions: once for 'lowering welfare benefits' (variant 1c), twice for 'softdrugs' (variant 1b and 1c), twice for the 'powers of the EU' (variant 1a and 2b) and once for the NATO in Syria question (see Figure 7.4). Most distributions, however, do not show a different outcome of what the public wants.

The second effect of the follow-up question can be a disappearing majority; more than 50 percent of the respondents used a particular response option, but

after excluding the permissive opinions only a minority remains. The preferred outcome, however, does not change; only the size of the majority diminishes. This happens fairly often: for most items the majority agreeing or disagreeing with a statement becomes a plurality when ('not upset') permissive opinions are excluded. From a total of ten survey questions (in six questionnaire variants), only three show a majority expressing a particular directive preferred outcome: 'developmental aid' (in all variants), 'mortgage interest deduction' (in five variants) and 'burqa ban' (in all variants). Figure 7.5 shows that a majority of the respondents of all subgroups disagreed with the statement that there are too many people of a non-Dutch nationality living in the Netherlands, but the distinction between permissive and directive opinions results in a plurality giving a directive disagreeing answer. The opposite but less common effect is present in Figure 7.6: even when permissive answers are classified as non-substantive answers, a majority remains supporting the burqa ban.

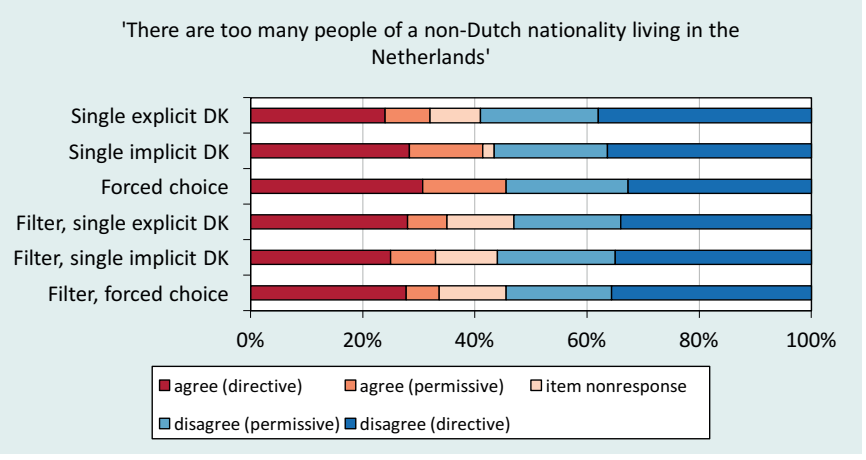


Figure 7.5: Distribution of Opinions Non-Dutch Nationality

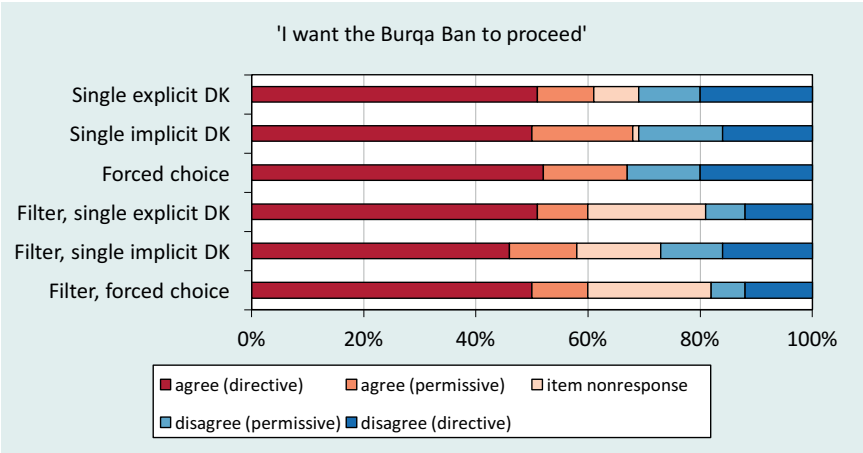


Figure 7.6: Distribution of Opinions Burqa Ban

The disappearing majority resulting from the follow-up question suggests that in many cases the overall picture of public opinion is less clear, or at least that the preferred option is not strongly supported by over half of the public. In some cases, the majority may not even have a directive opinion. The main point here is regarding the full distribution. Often no majority remains when permissive opinions are excluded as substantive answers; remaining majorities are at best small.

To summarize: the use of a follow-up question affects the substantive distributions of opinions in several ways. The majority or plurality supporting a certain outcome changes, disappears or diminishes substantially. The use of a follow-up question adds information about what individual citizens want to happen with their opinion; the answer is that they often do not really care. And if they do not care, why should others?

7.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, the focus was on the way reported substantive answers may affect political decision-making. More specially, it was about the extent to which citizens want politicians to be responsive. The analysis was structured by the question whether respondents considered their opinions to be directive or not. The experiment was carried out by the Team Vier internet panel.

The first part of the analysis focused on directive opinions, i.e. opinions that the respondent would be upset about if the issue was decided otherwise. Almost

all items had a majority reporting a directive opinion, with the exception of some current affairs questions, and the percentage often exceeded 60 percent. This finding is different from Moore, who concluded for the US that most issues rendered at least 40 percent permissive opinions and consequently at most 60 percent directive opinions. Overall our Dutch respondents indicated far more often that they would be (very) upset if the policy outcome did not reflect their preferred position. The results did, however, show a relation between item nonresponse and directive opinions (supporting expectation E1a): the average percentage of directive opinions was strongly correlated to the average percentage of respondents saying they would not be upset if their opinion did not prevail.

The expectation (E2a) that questions about issues related to a major political dimension – socio-economic, ethical and multicultural – would result in more directive opinions compared to questions not related to these dimensions was supported for most items. Also, survey questions relating to foreign policy issues in general resulted in less directive opinions, as expected (E2b).

Since surveys and polls are often used by politicians as a means to assess what the general public wants, their outcome can be a relevant or even crucial part of the public and political debate. This is what makes the inclusion of the directive – permissive distinction important: if a large majority or plurality does not really care either way, should politicians follow them? And although Dutch citizens expressed less permissive opinions than Moore's Americans, a substantial part of the Dutch public (about 35 percent) did not give an answer to a survey question indicating that they actually wanted to see their opinion carried out in the decision-making. The analysis of the distributions of opinions strongly suggested that the overall picture that emerges may indeed be different in terms of majorities and pluralities. Most importantly: often only a small minority holds a strong, directive position.

The use of a follow-up question affected the outcome in a number of ways. First, for some items the outcome preferred by a majority or plurality changed, resulting in a different overall picture of public opinion. Secondly, various items did not result in a response option preferred by a majority when all permissive opinions, i.e. item nonresponse and 'not upset' answers to the follow-up question, were excluded. And finally, for some items the size of the majority changed and the public seemed more divided. The second effect of disappearing majorities was prevalent, but all three effects strongly suggest that the use of a follow-up question results in a different picture of public opinion, with a substantial part of the public that does not deeply seem to care about the particular policy outcome.

Painting a valid picture of public opinion is complex and even more complex than simply including non-substantive response options. It can be argued that only a small part of the public at large has an opinion that should be considered as

part of the decision-making process. Simply measuring whether people agree or disagree with a statement is not enough to use the opinions of individual citizens in the decision-making process and treat their opinions as serious expressions of a preferred policy outcome.