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

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Citation

Maat, J. van de. (2019, September 17). *Public opinion without opinions? Item nonresponse and (the absence of) substantive opinions in public opinion surveys*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/76853>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Issue Date: 2019-09-17

CHAPTER 9

Discussion and Implications (Conclusions II)

'The argument today is not about developing a new conception of public opinion in which polls have little or no role. It's about having polls remain in their central role by making sure they tell the whole story about what the public is thinking - to include not just what preferences it has, but also what proportion of the public has no preferences at all' (Moore, 2008, p. 158).

Moore nicely summarizes the goal of this study: to reveal a more complete picture of public opinion as measured by surveys and polls, including that part of the public that does not express an opinion or does not care about the outcome. Methodological aspects like item nonresponse and question design effects may be of interest to academics and survey methodologists, but they are relevant more generally when they affect the picture of public opinion. What impression of public opinion do we get when the image emerging from surveys is different when a different question design is used? Can we expect politicians to be responsive to public opinion if it is dependent on methodological choices like question wording? Sniderman *et al* argue that ‘if it is true that citizens are just making it up as they go along, then political leaders may even have an obligation to discount what the public thinks that it thinks, since if the question had varied even slightly, the answers could well have varied markedly’ (Sniderman *et al.*, 2001, p. 256). If the picture of public opinion varies depending on question design, politicians may feel allowed or even obliged to dismiss public opinion. Methodological issues, and specifically question design effects, are therefore crucial for the debate on public opinion in a democracy and politicians’ responsiveness to public opinion surveys.

The general research question in this study was: *How does question design regarding non-substantive response options affect survey outcomes?* More specifically, the effect of using non-substantive response options – the Don’t Know option, filter question and follow-up question – on item nonresponse and the substantive overall distribution of opinions was examined. To find out whether and how question design elements, and specifically non-substantive response options, affect results, three survey experiments were conducted with three Dutch internet panels (the LISS panel, the EenVandaag Opiniepanel and the Team Vier internet panel). The general aim was to investigate the impact of various ways of offering a non-substantive response option on two specific aspects of the picture of public opinion: 1) non-substantive answers, i.e. item nonresponse and permissive opinions and 2) their impact on the substantive results or actual distribution of opinions. The aim was to look at various ways to register non-substantive answers and their impact on survey outcomes and specifically on substantive answers to survey questions.

9.1 Non-Substantive Response Options and Survey Results: A Summary of Findings

How do non-substantive response options affect item nonresponse? Four options were explored: no non-substantive response option (forced choice), the implicit (DK) option to skip questions, an explicit DK option (both single explicit as a response category and double explicit with a reference to the DK option in the question) and the filter question (in a weak and strong worded version). These were used as single non-substantive response options or in a combination of a filter question followed by a substantive opinion question with a DK option. The main expectation was that the more explicit a non-substantive response option was presented, the more item nonresponse would result. This expectation is supported by the data: the explicit DK option renders more item nonresponse than the implicit DK option and the filter question renders more item nonresponse than the explicit DK option in one of the two applications of the filter question. Offering a non-substantive response option more explicitly ‘encourages’ respondents to give a non-substantive answer and the effect of a filter question preceding the opinion question is stronger than the effect of a DK option, although the size of the effect depends on the specific panel and experiment and the filter question did not have the strongest effect on item nonresponse in all experiments. The filter question rendered about 5 to 6 percent (in EenVandaag’s *Opiniepanel*) or about 18 percent nonresponse (in Team Vier’s internet panel), which was much lower than suggested in the literature (Bishop, 2005; Bishop et al., 1983; Eckman et al., 2014; Schuman & Presser, 1979). Nevertheless, both the explicitness and type of non-substantive response option clearly affected the number of non-substantive answers.

A second question was whether and how the overall substantive distribution of opinions changed with question design. A higher nonresponse rate provides greater opportunities for bias, but the occurrence of a bias depends on whether the data are missing at random or not. However, the picture of public opinion proved to be barely affected by question design. The overall outcome was robust and, with few exceptions, does not suggest that we should be overly concerned about whether and how the respondent could express having no opinion, at least for gauging what the general public wants or thinks. Including non-substantive response options may still be preferable to establish what part of the public holds an opinion, but for a valid impression of the policy option preferred in society at large it does not really make a difference whether a non-substantive response option is offered or not. Overall, the effect of offering a non-substantive response option is that item nonresponse changes, but not the resulting picture of public opinion in terms of majorities or pluralities.

The effect of a non-substantive response option for substantively different issues was expected to vary per the relation to a major political dimension (resulting in less item nonresponse) or to foreign policy issues (resulting in more nonresponse). The results were mixed: both expectations were supported in two of the three experiments. More research is needed to differentiate between question content.

Strictly speaking not being a non-substantive response option, the follow-up question, in which respondents were asked after a substantive answer to the opinion question, whether they would be upset if their opinion did not prevail, makes a distinction between permissive and directive opinions. Permissive opinions, i.e. 'not upset' answers and item nonresponse, arguably cannot be considered as clear or strong directives for politicians. Permissive opinions can therefore be construed or at least considered to be a non-substantive answer; part of the public does not care which policy is pursued, even after expressing a particular opinion. About two-third of the respondents expressed a directive opinion, which was more than expected (see Moore, 2008). Furthermore, the expectations that issues related to a major political dimension would result in more directive opinions and foreign policy issues in relatively fewer directive opinions were both supported.

The effect of non-substantive response options on survey results were the core of this study, but some other methodological issues were addressed. Questions with more substantive response categories yielded less item nonresponse and respondents of variants without a non-substantive response option, or a less explicit option, used the neutral or midpoint response category relatively often. All of these conclusions are, however, only tentative; more systematic analyses are needed.

To summarize: Bogart (1972) is right in saying that 'the question of what people think about public issues is really secondary to the question of whether they think about them at all' and this is captured by non-substantive response options. Public opinion is, however, quite robust as regards the substantive outcome.

9.2 Implications and Recommendations

What does it mean that the various non-substantive response options affect item nonresponse but not the overall substantive distribution of opinions? One could conclude that for the substantive overall outcome it does not matter how and whether non-substantive response options are offered: the picture of public opinion does not differ. If journalists or politicians want to know what policy option or position is preferred by the public at large, they can look at any questionnaire variant and as a rule the same preference is measured. But that is not the whole story: item nonresponse should be treated as an indicator of whether the public

thinks about an issue at all and this information should not be ignored. Should 'we' listen to what the public wants if a large part of the public does not have an opinion or does not care about the issue?

Respondents should be given the option to give a non-substantive answer in polls and survey questions for several reasons. First, it is a service to respondents who take the time to participate and may feel discouraged when they are unable to leave a question unanswered. Secondly, item nonresponse reflects how many people are unable or unwilling to give a substantive answer. This is relevant in and of itself, and can be considered as an indicator of whether the general public cares or thinks about a particular issue and subsequently whether public opinion on this issue should be taken seriously and into account. The notions 'non-substantive answers' and 'missing data', which were used frequently in this study, should not detract from the fact that valuable information is gathered. Offering an explicit DK option and/or filter question is a means to get a complete and nuanced picture of public opinion.

An innovative non-substantive response option is the follow-up question. The resulting distinction between permissive and directive opinions provides information as to how individual opinions and how 'serious' the answers to opinion questions should be regarded. When this distinction is taken into account, oftentimes only a plurality remains which really supports and wants to stick to a certain policy. Surveys may provide valuable information about what the public wants (in a democracy), and the use of the follow-up question shows that we can investigate whether the public itself wants the opinions to matter. Even when the general public has and expresses an opinion about an issue, their thoughts and preferences do not always have to guide politicians in their decision-making, especially if part of the public does not care about what happens to their thoughts and preferences. Listening to the largest group when part of the public does not really care about the outcome means that a relatively small group with strong opinions dictates policy, which is very important to keep in mind for politicians who want to take the public's voice into account.

Based on this study, a number of recommendations can be made. From a methodological perspective, I recommend a) to focus more on the question whether the *complete* picture of public opinion changes and not just item nonresponse, by looking at both the substantive answers and the number of non-opinions expressed; b) to include non-substantive response options to reveal public ignorance and non-opinions and discourage nonattitudes, i.e. to view non-substantive answers as valid and relevant information; and c) to make more use of the follow-up question and apply it more systematically to examine the respondent's intent and to see whether the given answer should be considered as directive for policymaking. For politicians,

journalists and anyone interested in the picture of public opinion, I recommend a) to always view survey results critically and find out whether respondents were offered a non-substantive response option; b) to keep in mind how much of the public is ignorant about the issue at hand; and c) to consider the distinction between directive and permissive opinions. Not all survey results are equally guiding.

My main recommendation, however, is to start by including the most basic non-substantive response option, the explicit Don't Know option, as a response category for opinion questions. And this recommendation (to offer an explicit DK option) is even more applicable for technical and abstract issues, for issues the respondents may not have (as much) personal experience with or for new 'emerging' issues. Knowledge is power and non-substantive answers provide valuable information about public opinion. Respondents should not be 'pushed' into using substantive response options. The DK option does not lengthen the survey (thereby increasing respondent burden) or alter response behaviour substantially, as shown in this study, but it does give us more information about public opinion as measured with surveys. Furthermore, by making the DK option a standard practice, we may find out more about when respondents are unable or unwilling to express an opinion.

9.3 Limitations of the Study

This study has three main limitations, related to 1) external validity; 2) the internal validity of the findings about other methodological elements than the non-substantive response options, for example the number of substantive response categories and panel characteristics; and 3) the choice for the Netherlands as a case to collect data.

The first limitation is about the ability to generalize the findings of this study to the (Dutch) population. Only one of the three internet panels used in this study is probability-based (the LISS panel). The other two panels are volunteer or convenience samples and result from self-selection, which threatens their representativeness of the population. Only probability-based, random samples allow for generalization to the population. Nonprobability-based panels may suffer from problems with non-coverage and selection bias, e.g. an overrepresentation of Internet users, people interested in research or substantive issues, or people wanting to earn money by doing surveys. Generalizing to the population is therefore problematic. Regarding external validity, the main point is that one should be careful in generalizing the findings of this study to the population. The American Association for Public Opinion Research concluded in a report on online panels that 'claims of "representativeness" should be avoided (AAPOR, 2010, p. 5).

At the same time, the problems with external validity should not be exaggerated.

First of all, the outcome of a survey conducted with an internet panel is how public opinion in practice is often gauged and this representation of what the public wants is subsequently used in the public and political debate. So even in case of the sample being unrepresentative of the population, the outcome is typical for what the picture of public opinion very often looks like.

The second reason why the limited external validity is not a major limitation in this study, is that the main aim is to establish causal validity. Survey experiments are very suitable for that purpose. AAPOR concludes that a nonprobability online panel, like the EenVandaag Opiniepanel and Team Vier's internet panel, can be 'an acceptable alternative to traditional probability-based methods' when generalizing to the population is not the goal of the study (AAPOR, 2010, p. 5). The between-subjects experimental design of this study allowed for a comparison of various randomly drawn subgroups within the panels to establish internal validity. Subgroups were randomly assigned to a question design, i.e. the treatment variable non-substantive response options. The main goal was to examine the effect of non-substantive response options on survey results under various treatment conditions, not necessarily to generalize to the population. All three internet panels used in this study were suitable for such internet survey experiments. In other words: despite the limited external validity, the findings are robust.

The second limitation, i.e. the internal validity of other methodological elements than non-substantive response options, directly follows from the experimental design. The variables manipulated were non-substantive response options; other factors - including number of response categories, the use of a midpoint option, and panel characteristics – were held constant as much as possible. The number of response categories and inclusion of a midpoint option varied, because the response categories of the original questions varied, but as such they were not subject to experimental manipulation. All elements were held constant across subgroups and questionnaire variants, which produced robust findings that non-substantive response options affect survey outcomes.

What was not possible, however, was a comparison of the findings between the three experiments. The internet panels used to collect data differed substantially from one another, e.g. in sample composition, incentives and number of respondents. Furthermore, the timing of the three experiments was not the same. Some tentative trends among the three experiments and panels were described in chapter 8, but the main strength in terms of internal validity lies in the between-subjects-design set-up of the three individual experiments. How panel characteristics affected the outcome of the internet survey experiments is unknown.

The third and final main limitation of this study is the choice for the Netherlands as a case to conduct data collection. Whether the findings travel to other countries

is unknown, although previous research in for example the United States and Germany suggests that the findings of this study are not deviant. Nevertheless, the conclusions should not unthinkingly be applied to other settings.

9.4 Avenues for Future Research

In this study, I looked at a small but important part of the puzzle regarding the way public opinion is measured with surveys: non-substantive response options and their effect on survey outcomes. It has been demonstrated that survey questions do not simply collect existing opinions; they affect the answers given and therefore partially create the picture of public opinion. The first avenue for future research concerns the limitations discussed and points to a more systematic analysis of the number of response categories, and the use of a midpoint or 'neutral' response category. The general suggestion is that the scope should be broadened to encompass other elements of survey methodology to see how the way we ask survey questions affects the outcome.

The focus in this study was on respondents' answers to survey questions and the picture of public opinion which is created by aggregating such individual answers. Question design may, however, not affect all respondents equally and in the same way. More research should be done to see which respondents are more susceptible to certain design choices. This study has not distinguished between data missing completely at random (MCAR) and data missing at random given covariates (MAR). Question design aspects may, however, affect certain respondents differently. By looking at respondent characteristics and the differences between respondents and non-respondents at the individual level, a more complete picture can be created of the ways in which question design affects non-substantive and substantive answers to survey questions.

Another way of differentiating between the susceptibility of individual respondents to question design is by looking at their level of information. A more informed citizenry may result in a different picture of public opinion, which can be gauged by deliberative polling. Deliberative polling is according to some researchers the solution for the two major problems that citizens seem to suffer from: 'rational ignorance' and 'nonattitudes' (Fishkin, 1996, pp. 133-134). When using the deliberative polling method, the question is what the public's opinion would be if everyone was well and equally informed. By giving respondents information and discussing the issue at hand in small groups, according to some it is established 'what the public would think if it had a better chance to think about the questions at issue' (Fishkin, 1996, p. 134; see also Althaus, 1996; Fishkin, 1991; Steiner, 2010; Sturgis, 2003). Even

though it can be argued that feeding respondents information might ‘contaminate’ the sample of citizens (Moore, 2008, p. 34) and the process is time consuming and costly, deliberative polling provides the opportunity to see what public opinion would look like if citizens were better informed.

While this study has ignored what device respondents used to complete the web or internet survey, there is some evidence that response patterns are not the same for all devices (see e.g. De Bruijne & Wijnant, 2014; Mavletova, 2013; Mavletova & Couper, 2014; Toninelli, Pinter, & Pedraza, 2015). Initial response to a survey invitation, completion time, drop-out rates and the length of answers to open-ended questions are only a few examples of challenges introduced by doing surveys on tablets and mobile phones. The differences between web surveys completed by mobile phone or tablet rather than laptop or computer are even less well-known when item nonresponse rates and substantive response patterns are considered.

A final avenue for future research is to move beyond public opinion as measured by surveys and also look at other means to assess public opinion, like media content or letters (to officials) (Herbst, 1998, pp. 182-185) or social media. These representations of public opinion are based on a different conceptualization of public opinion, but they also affect the citizens who are asked about their opinion in surveys. Does public opinion look different in these alternative representations? How does the process of public opinion formation work in these alternative representations? And how do they affect public opinion as measured by surveys?

The main point to take away from this study is that public opinion consists of answers to individual opinion *questions*, not necessarily individual *opinions*. These answers are at least to some extent affected by the way the questions are asked.