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American Association for Public Opinion Research

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Author(s): Kenneth A. Rasinski
Source: *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Autumn, 1989), pp. 388-394
Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Association for Public Opinion Research
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2749127>
Accessed: 05/04/2009 22:40

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THE EFFECT OF QUESTION WORDING ON PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT SPENDING

KENNETH A. RASINSKI

Abstract Analyses of question wording experiments on the General Social Survey spending items showed consistent wording effects for several issues across three years. An examination of types of wording change indicate that even minor changes can affect responses. However, an examination of interactions with respondent individual differences showed no consistent pattern.

Since 1973 the General Social Survey has included questions that ask the public to evaluate a variety of government spending policies. These "spending items" have played an important role in tracking public support for government fiscal involvement in 15 key policy areas such as defense, aid to minorities, education, and foreign aid. However, since most of the issues in the spending item questions can be described using a variety of labels, each potentially evoking a different symbol (Fee, 1981), and since the choice of a label for an issue can dramatically affect responses (Smith, 1987), it seemed natural to explore whether support for these issues depended upon the choice of words used to describe them.

The matter is further complicated because of unevenness in the wordings of the spending items. Some of the issues were described by the simple presentation of a label (e.g., space exploration, welfare), while others were described in a manner suggesting that an enhanced outcome would result from increased spending (e.g., improving and protecting the environment, halting the rising crime rate). It

KENNETH A. RASINSKI is a survey director at NORC. This research was funded by a NORC Director's Grant. The author thanks Robert Michael both for making the funds available and for helpful comments on an earlier version of the paper. The author also thanks Bruce Spencer for help in procuring the funding, and Tom Smith and Roger Tourangeau for helpful advice at various stages of the research. Requests for reprints should be directed to Kenneth A. Rasinski, NORC, The University of Chicago, 1155 E. 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637.

also seemed prudent to ask whether such enhancements influenced responses.

To study the effects of labeling and enhancement, split-ballot experiments were conducted in the 1984, 1985, and 1986 General Social Surveys. Many of the wording variations in these experiments were present in all three years, thus offering an excellent opportunity to examine the robustness of wording effects. The spending issues, their original wordings, the wording variations, and the years in which the variations appear are shown in Table 1. In the following sections I present an analysis of results from these experiments. Along with variations in question wording, I included education level, political ideology, and gender in the analysis to test for interactions between wording variation and respondent individual differences.

Method

Multinomial logit analysis was used to examine the effect of question wording and individual differences on responses to each of the spending items. Included in the analysis for each item within each year were the three-category response variable (spending too little, about right, or too much), variables contrasting wording variation, respondent gender, education level, and political ideology. Education level and political ideology were trichotomized such that each year's sample was divided into roughly three equal parts. As suggested by the GSS codebook (GSS, 1986:556), the appropriate weight variable was used to correct for problems with form-randomization procedures. All reported percentages and statistics take these weights into account. The small number of respondents who gave a "don't know" response to a particular spending item were excluded from the analysis for that item.

RESULTS

Though several interactions of wording with background characteristics were found, none were consistent across the three years, and only one interaction for one issue was consistent across two years. These interactions are presented elsewhere (Rasinski, 1988) and will not be examined further in this report. Three of the five issues in which the wording manipulation consisted of using different issue labels showed significant effects of label change across all three years. These issues are shown in Table 2. More support was found for halting crime than for law enforcement, for dealing with drug addiction than for drug rehabilitation, and for assistance to the poor than for welfare. The latter result has been documented by Smith (1987) for the 1984 GSS,

Table 1. GSS Wording Variations, 1984, 1985, and 1986

Version 1 (Original) 1984, 1985, and 1986	Version 2 1984, 1985, and 1986	Version 3 1984 Only
Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on . . .		
Space exploration program	Space exploration	Advancing space exploration
Improving and protecting the environment	The environment	Improving and protecting the environment
Improving and protecting the nation's health	Health	Improving and protecting the nation's health
Solving the problems of the big cities	Assistance to big cities	Solving the problems of the big cities
Halting the rising crime rate	Law enforcement	Reducing crime
Dealing with drug addiction	Drug rehabilitation	Reducing drug addiction
Improving the nation's education system	Education	Improving the nation's education system
Improving the condition of blacks	Assistance to blacks	Improving the condition of blacks
The military, armaments and defense	National defense	Strengthening national defense
Foreign aid	Assistance to other countries	Helping other countries
Welfare	Assistance to the poor	Caring for the poor
Version 1 1984 Only	Version 2 1984 Only	Version 3 1984 Only
Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on . . .		
Highways and bridges	Highways and bridges	Improving the condition of highways and bridges
Social Security	Social Security	Protecting Social Security
Mass transportation	Mass transportation	Improving mass transportation
Parks and recreation	Parks and recreation	Improving parks and recreation

Table 2. Effect of Label Changes on Support for Crime, Drug Addiction, and Welfare Spending Items

Year	Percent Saying Too Little Is Spent		Coeff. (S.E.)	χ^2 (d.f.)	<i>p</i>
Crime					
	Halting Rising Crime Rate	Law Enforcement			
1984	69.3	56.5	.293 (.076)	16.31 (2)	<.001
1985	67.3	57.8	.118 (.054)	14.36 (2)	<.001
1986	66.8	52.9	.204 (.054)	28.11 (2)	<.001
Drug Addiction					
	Dealing with Drug Addiction	Drug Rehabilitation			
1984	64.4	49.4	.325 (.068)	21.36 (2)	<.001
1985	66.6	58.0	.158 (.054)	20.31 (2)	<.001
1986	60.7	56.3	.125 (.049)	6.53 (2)	<.038
Welfare					
	Assistance to the Poor	Welfare			
1984	64.1	25.2	.749 (.066)	165.2 (2)	<.001
1985	65.2	19.8	.760 (.050)	356.8 (2)	<.001
1986	62.8	23.1	.650 (.049)	282.5 (2)	<.001

NOTES: Chi-square statistics represent only the overall effect of wording variation on the three-level response variable. Coefficients and standard errors are from the multinomial logit analyses including background factors. These coefficients contrast responses given in the table with the spending “about right” position.

and he reports similar results found in other surveys. The present analysis attests to the robustness of the effect of wording on support for social welfare.

In the 1984 survey all 15 issues had manipulations in which the wording change consisted either of adding a positive verb before the label describing the program (e.g., advancing space exploration vs. space exploration) or of changing the existing verb to a more positive verb or verb phrase (e.g., assistance to big cities vs. solving problems of big cities). Effects for five of the latter type of wording variations were found but only two of these five, spending to help cities and to help blacks, showed significant changes due to wording variation across the three surveys. Results for these two issues are presented in Table 3.

Results for all three years show that greater support was found for "solving the problem of big cities" than for "assistance to big cities." Similarly, more support was found for "improving the conditions of blacks" than for "assistance to blacks." An effect of merely preceding the issue label with a positive verb was found for only one issue, social security. Because the enhancement experiment for social security was only conducted in 1984, an assessment of the replicability of this result cannot be made, and the results should be interpreted with caution. The effect is shown at the bottom of Table 3. Substantially more support was reported for "protecting social security" than for "social security."

Conclusion

The question wording experiments show that issue labeling and enhancement can have a substantial effect on public support for some issues. The effect of labeling was quite robust, showing similar effects within issues across the three years. Smith (1987) has argued that different labels for the welfare issue may bring to mind different associations, actually changing the stimuli to which respondents are reacting. The present results suggest that this effect may not be limited to welfare. For example, when a respondent thinks about halting crime he or she may bring to mind a set of uniformly positive beliefs and feelings associated with the personal and social benefits of a lowered crime rate. Conversely, the reference to law enforcement may call up a host of both positive and negative beliefs and feelings, such as those associated with crime prevention, law and order, traffic and parking tickets, corruption, and police brutality, leading to a lowered overall level of support. Similarly, for the drug addiction issue the wording "dealing

Table 3. Effects of Enhancement on Support for Assistance to Cities, Blacks, and Social Security

Year	Percent Saying Too Little Is Spent		Coeff. (S.E.)	χ^2 (d.f.)	<i>p</i>
Cities					
	Assistance to Big Cities	Solving Problems of Big Cities			
1984	21.3	52.0	.341 (.038)	107.99 (2)	<.001
1985	20.8	45.7	.467 (.033)	137.73 (2)	<.001
1986	17.7	48.2	.464 (.048)	146.03 (2)	<.001
Blacks					
	Assistance to Blacks	Improving Conditions of Blacks			
1984	26.8	36.5	.121 (.034)	19.80 (2)	<.001
1985	28.2	33.7	.098 (.044)	10.88 (2)	<.004
1986	27.8	36.5	.208 (.046)	33.85 (2)	<.001
Social Security					
	Social Security	Protecting Social Security			
1984	53.2	68.2	.164 (.064)	29.26 (2)	<.001

NOTES: Chi-square statistics represent only the overall effect of wording variation on the three-level response variable. Coefficients and standard errors are from the multinomial logit analyses including background factors. These coefficients contrast responses given in the table with the spending “about right” position.

with drug addiction” may suggest a more positive stance toward the problem, while the wording “drug rehabilitation” may seem static and untantalizing to the imagination.

The effect of substituting the verb preceding the spending item with another more positive verb phrase was also consistent across years and across different issues. The simple enhancement effect (preceding an

issue with a single positive verb) only affected responses to one issue, but the robustness of the effect cannot be determined because the variations were not replicated across the three years.

Many studies have shown wording effects before, but we currently have little understanding about when and why such effects occur. While the present evidence does not provide answers to these questions, it does contribute new examples of successful and failed question wording experiments. A compendium of such evidence may eventually facilitate the formulation of a general theory of question wording effects. However, it seems more likely that progress in this area will arise from the efforts of researchers in the area of cognition and communication who are currently applying their efforts to understanding how people answer survey questions (e.g., Tourangeau and Rasinski, 1988).

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