

RESPONSE FORM EFFECTS IN ELECTION POLLING¹

By Jesse F. Marquette

Research on response form effects has clearly established that the manner of presentation of available options in a forced response item can significantly affect the distribution of choices by respondents. The presence or absence of an offered "undecided" response affects, of course, the proportion of subjects claiming to have an opinion. Even for obscure topics, large numbers of individuals will report an opinion if the choice of "undecided" is not clearly presented as an acceptable response. Interestingly, though, there has been little work on the effects of offering an "undecided" response in election-related questions.

The Research

The research reported here was part of a larger study of the 1990 general election in Ohio.² This particular experiment was conducted on the voter preference item for the Governor's race in which the ultimate victor, Republican George Voinovich, ran against then Attorney General, Democrat Anthony Celebrezze. The race was very competitive, and both candidates spent immense amounts on media—the ultimate outlay exceeding \$16 million. We hypothesized that there would be significant form effects generated by the standard candidate preference question—"If the election were held today, would you vote for...?"—depending whether respondents were offered or not offered an undecided position.

Respondents were randomly assigned by the CATI system to one of four categories: (1) Celebrezze mentioned first, no offer for undecided (206 cases); (2) Voinovich mentioned first, no offer for undecided (201 cases); (3) Celebrezze mentioned first, offered undecided (195 cases); (4) Voinovich mentioned first, offered undecided (199 cases). The name rotation is presented only for the purpose of information, since it is our standard practice to rotate candidate names. We did not expect (and did not find) this rotation having any effect on the outcome of the response form experiment.

Not offered form: If the election were held today, would you vote for Mr. Celebrezze or Mr. Voinovich?

Offered form: If the election were held today, would you vote for Mr. Celebrezze, or Mr. Voinovich or have you not decided yet?

Follow up: Of the two tickets, which are you LEANING toward, the Democrat Celebrezze or the Republican Voinovich?

The Results

Our hypothesis is supported by the evidence in the Table. The offered form of the vote intention item produces 21% more self-reported undecideds than the alternative. The more interesting result is the 9 point benefit apparently accruing to the leader in the race, among those prodded into choosing by the blunt expectations of the unoffered form. Under the offered form the race appears much closer. This pattern does not change when the "leaners" are allocated. Given the potential practical and theoretical significance of these findings, it is clear that more research needs to be done on response form effects in election polling.

Form	Stated Vote Intention		
	Celebrezze	Voinovich	Undecided
"Undecided" Offered	28%	34%	39%
"Undecided" Not Offered	34	49	18

Endnotes

¹This article focuses on only one part of the argument made in a much longer paper delivered at AAPOR. While the focus here is on the results obtained using two different forms of an election question, the longer paper goes on to discuss the relationship with level of information, candidate evaluation, likelihood of voting, education, and race.

²The project on which the research is based was the third in a series of polls covering the 1990 Ohio general elections for the media consortium consisting of the Akron Beacon Journal, Cleveland television station WKYC, and Columbus television station WBNH. The research was carried out by professional interviewers of the University of Akron Survey Research Center from the University CATI facility during the period 10/24 to 11/1, with no interviewing scheduled on Friday the 26th or Sunday the 28th. A total of 801 interviews were completed with self-identified registered voters, 614 from "cold" calls, 143 from appointments and 44 from refusal conversions.

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