

How The Questionnaire Could Have Been Improved

by Alan F. Kay

In late January, the presidential campaign season was kicked off with public television's prime-time coverage of the four-million dollar National Issues Convention (NIC). The event showcased the impact of a weekend of issue deliberation on the opinions and attitudes of a group of American citizens. Given the cost and attention that the event received, the survey designed to tap the opinion's of NIC participants should have been among the best ever done. Unfortunately, the survey instrument was flawed, thus making an accurate interpretation of the findings difficult.¹

Questions from the NIC survey are examined here to illustrate problems with the survey instrument and suggest remedies which could have been utilized without incurring difficult or expensive compliance problems.

Give Respondents More Options

An important function of polling in the public's interest is determining what policies the public wants when presented fully and fairly with all choices. The options should include more than the few that political leaders are promoting and that the media see as newsworthy. When presented with a wide range of choices, the public can specify its own priorities rather than merely react to an agenda set by special interests. Politicians prefer to talk about just one choice, their own. Media polls in a bipartisan mode may consider both sides, rarely more. Yet, the public has a need to know whatever public majorities want.² In a public poll that gauges policy preferences, a reasonable effort should be made to examine a wider range of choices than is often done.

In the case of the NIC survey, consider Question 15 where a greater range of choices would have revealed important, and quite different, findings:

"Now that the Cold War is over, which one of the following opportunities is most important for the United States to pursue?"

1. The chance to shift resources back home to help our own economy;
2. The chance to use our military strength and leadership to bring order around the world;
3. The chance to promote democracy in other countries."

An alternative that characterizes why many support the North American Free

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Trade Agreement, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the World Trade Organization, (including the Clinton administration and a majority in Congress) is not to be found among these three choices. Omitting a pro-trade alternative is irresponsible. A stab at an alternative which could have been a fourth item:

“The chance to buy, make or invest abroad to help our own economy.”

Another example of devaluing a question by failing to offer a choice which in fact has greater public support than any of the other response options occurs in Question 16:

“If the US does continue to give foreign aid, for what purpose should the aid be given: Military support only; Economic development only; Both military support and economic development.”

Not present among these alternatives is continued support of foreign aid to assist in humanitarian efforts. Humanitarian assistance easily would have been a more popular response than either economic or military support. Even in the Cold War era when the American public was asked whether foreign aid should be increased, kept the same, or decreased for humanitarian aid and for military aid, the responses were overwhelmingly for humanitarian assistance, respectively, (50%, 35%, 12%) over military aid (7%, 32%, 58%).³

Response Categories Not Mutually Exclusive

“Neither” and “Both” were not offered as response categories in many of the questions asked by the NIC, thus implying that the available response options were mutually exclusive. This type of question follows the logic of asking a respondent to choose between the following two precepts: “Look before you leap,” and “He who hesitates is lost.” The essence of wisdom is to recognize that there is some truth in

Table 1: With Unbalanced Response Categories, Support for the Option With More “Response Types” is Likely to be Inflated

Question 10: In the future, how willing should the United States be to send troops to solve problems in other countries?

Extremely willing	2%	} 65% willing?
Very willing	5	
Somewhat willing	58	
Not very willing	26	} 31%
Not willing	5	
Don't know	4	

Source: Survey by the National Opinion Research Center for the National Issues Convention, November 1995 (pre-deliberation survey).

Question: Because the United States is a leading world power, do you think the US has a responsibility to give military assistance in trouble spots around the world, or don't you think the United States has this responsibility?

Has responsibility	47%
Doesn't have responsibility	42
Don't know/No answer	11

Source: Survey by CBS News, November 27, 1995.

While these are slightly different items, the size of the difference between those saying “willing” versus “has responsibility” suggests the need for a balanced number of response categories in the NIC item.

both, of course, as there is in many of the NIC two-response category items. For example:

“America’s interests should always come first” or “People should consider the interests of people in other countries too.”

The response “both” should have been offered for this item. In an ongoing informal survey I am taking, so far of a clearly biased sample: two taxi drivers, one barber, and four acquaintances, all volunteered “both.” I am guessing only that, if offered, “both” would get some percentage of support above zero.

Another related example to consider is the following:

Q26: “The economy can run only if businesses make good profits. That benefits everyone in the end.”

Q27: “Today the average worker does not receive a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work.”

Compare these two items with an alternative pair I have devised:

“On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means completely disagree and 5 means completely agree, how would you rate these

statements: The economy can run only if...

Q26alt, ...businesses make good profits.
Q27alt, ...workers receive fair pay.”

The NIC example does not allow for adequate comparison between the two items. But healthy profits for business and adequate pay for workers are both essential for the economy to function well. Both are desirable, but one is likely to come at the expense of the other. My alternative allows respondents to indicate their perceptions of the relative importance of profits versus wages. It is important to learn both how

Polling America

the public views this trade-off today and how responses may shift as economic conditions change. Formulating policy that encourages one alternative and thus discourages the others, without knowing what choices the public would make, is short-sighted.

Word Choices and Question Depth

It is tempting to use colloquialisms and metaphors of ordinary speech in survey questions. Metaphors can sometimes feel so comfortable that they serve as an excuse for thought, more on the part of the survey designers than the respondents. Consider the following NIC agree/disagree question:

“Some people think the government should let each person get ahead on their own. Others feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Which is closer to your view?”

The wording of this question does not convey what these choices mean and encourages clouded thinking. Does “see to it” mean see to it even for persons who do a poor job?...are incapable?...refuse to work? Does “on their own” mean stopping retraining, education and health care by withdrawing financial support of schools, hospitals, and communities, or any of a dozen other possibilities? Probably not, but the options are not properly defined.

It is the glory of the American people that in fact they figure out what survey designers mean with questions like this. Respondents probably answer many of these questions about the same as they would if the questions were more clearly defined. But why settle for “about the

same,” especially when people do answer more clearly defined questions as well or better than the vague colloquial versions. Such questions talk down to people who can comprehend more complex and correctly-phrased information. Question language should not be sloppy simply because designers don’t think it makes a difference, or because it worked or was useful in the past.

Use of Scales

It is not new to survey research that unbalanced response scales will pull answers toward the side with more op-

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tions. For example, Questions 10 and 11 of the NIC survey were willing/unwilling items with five point scales, three on one side—“extremely,” “very,” and “somewhat willing” and two on the other—“not very” and “never willing.” A fair fraction of respondents do not pay much attention to the interviewer’s instructions which define the scale. They respond as if their thought process was something like, “on this one I’m in the middle” and “on that one I’m at the top.” The collapsed response categories will include among the willing many who really consider themselves neutral—neither willing nor unwilling (see Table 1).

When using an uneven number of response categories a survey designer must give the respondent who is in the middle a viable response to choose.

High Profile, But Flawed

As the 1996 presidential election debate heats up, more and more poll result sound-bites quoted by politicians will amount to, “The public is with *me* on this issue.” Presented with these apparent contradictions the public may well conclude that at least one of the candidates is not telling the truth, or that the pollsters are wrong, or that the news media are hiding something. The net result of high-profile surveys, like the NIC, not being held to a higher standard of quality is a further fraying of the public’s trust of pollsters, politicians, and the news media.

From inadequate response categories to the use of unbalanced scales, the NIC survey instrument should have been better.

Endnotes:

¹ While there are a number of other methodological concerns being debated elsewhere with regard to the impact of the actual deliberative process (see *Public Perspective*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1996, pp. 1-20; 41-49 and other coverage featured in this issue of *Public Perspective*) here I put these issues aside. In principle, my concerns focus on the beginning point, the development of the survey instrument.

² See Bryan D. Jones, *Reconceiving Decision-Making in Democratic Politics, Choice, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); see also a review by Paul Burstein, in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Winter 1995, pp. 628-630, which presents a theory of the disconnect between public preferences and legislative policy-making.

³ *Americans Talk Security* #8, August 1988.



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