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SHOULD WE TAKE DON'T KNOW FOR AN ANSWER?

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Abstract Much attention has been given to the problem of non-attitudes, that is, people expressing opinions while lacking an underlying attitude (false positives). In comparison, the potential problem of false negatives, people with an attitude who decline to express an opinion, has been neglected. Using a survey on nuclear power from Sweden, we examine whether people who answer “don’t know” but are induced subsequently to give an opinion really have attitudes. The attitudes these people express on follow-up questions predict behavior to a significant extent. This implies that the usual don’t know category includes some false negatives, that is, people who really have attitudes but refrain, at least initially, from expressing them.

The concept of nonattitudes was brought forcefully to our attention by Philip Converse in 1964. Many people who lack an underlying attitude will, nonetheless, express an opinion if asked in an interview. People who express nonattitudes are *false positives*. They appear to have an attitude, but they really do not (Converse 1964, 1970, 1974).

Converse’s thesis stimulated much controversy and many subsequent analyses (cf. Inglehart 1985; Kinder and Sears 1985; Sniderman and Tetlock 1986). While still unresolved, there may be agreement that Converse pointed to an important question. There is direct evidence that at least some people who lack attitudes express opinions in interviews (e.g., Bishop et al. 1980; Hartley 1946; Schuman and Presser 1981, pp. 147–60).

In this debate, the other side of the coin has been almost completely ignored. In addition to false positives (nonattitudes), we should be alert to the possibility of *false negatives*, that is, people who really

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Table 1. Validity in Assessing Underlying Attitudes

| | The Person Expresses an Opinion | |
|---|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| | Yes | No |
| The person really has an underlying attitude: | | |
| Yes | Real attitudes (true positives) | Pseudo-nonattitudes (false negatives) |
| No | Pseudo-attitudes (false positives) | Real nonattitudes (true negatives) |

have an underlying attitude but decline the opportunity to express their opinion.¹ Table 1 illustrates four outcomes that result when a question is asked in an interview. Most people fall in the real attitude or real nonattitude diagonal, but there are also the problematical cells: the pseudo-attitudes and the pseudo-nonattitudes. Table 1 simplifies the row dimension by implying a dichotomy in which people have or lack an underlying attitude. While some people truly lack an underlying attitude, those with an attitude can be differentiated in many ways. Some have attitudes that are readily accessible, while the attitudes of others are quite inaccessible (Fazio and Williams 1986). When people with inaccessible attitudes seek to locate the relevant attitude structure and to retrieve an appropriate response to a question, they may not come up with sufficiently clear information about their feelings to render a judgment (Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988). Hence, a person who is assessed as having no attitude may, in fact, have a relatively inaccessible attitude.

Several reasons have been identified as to why people with attitudes might fail to express them in an interview situation (Galtung 1969; Smith 1984). If we think of affect as a theoretical continuum from extremely negative to extremely positive, very few people would be exactly at the neutral midpoint (Pierce and Rose 1974). However, those who depart only slightly in either direction from the midpoint may

1. Schuman and Presser used the term “floaters” when referring to “respondents who would give a substantive response to a standard version but a DK response to a filtered version of the same question” (1981, p. 118). The floaters could be expressing real nonattitudes on the filtered version, but if some of them really had underlying attitudes, they would be expressing pseudo-nonattitudes in the terms of table 1 (Bishop et al. 1979; Dean and Moran 1977).

have difficulty identifying and expressing their affect, especially when they are encouraged by an interviewer to take the "easy out" by saying they "don't know" or "haven't thought much about it." As Tom Smith put it, "People tagged as nonattitude-holders because they . . . give a DK response at one time may have labile attitudes with low centrality, but still have some affect toward an issue. While they may lack a stable, fully articulated, and meaningful position, they may well have certain leanings" (1984, p. 240).

The problem of pseudo-nonattitudes or false negatives, that is, people with attitudes who say "don't know," is largely academic if the category is very small, say less than 5 percent. However, with the "easy out" provision used in many surveys, it is not uncommon to have 20–30 percent who apparently lack an attitude on the question under consideration. Even without an "easy out" provision, the percentage of don't know responses can be very high. In Sweden, one of the most divisive political issues in the postwar era has been the wage earner fund (Gilljam 1988; Holmberg 1982). Yet when asked, "Are you for or against the formation of a wage earner fund according to the model of the Social Democrats and the labor unions?" the average percentage of don't know responses, across 18 surveys between 1981 and 1983, was 31 percent (Gilljam 1988, pp. 117–18).

Direct evidence regarding the possibility of pseudo-nonattitudes is sparse. Gilljam (1988, pp. 137–39) has shown through follow-up questions on the wage earner fund that 43 percent of the initial don't know people could be assigned a position favoring or opposing the wage earner fund. But do such answers really represent some underlying affect? There are at least three criteria that can be used: constraint, stability, and the relationship to behavior (Converse 1964; Duncan and Stenbeck 1988; Knight 1985; Smith 1984). Our analysis focuses on the latter. If there is really nothing there, if the don't know people really have no attitudes, then pressing them into taking a position is a meaningless exercise. Whatever position they are pushed into taking should be of no use in predicting behavior. The test involves observing the relationship between attitude and behavior separately for those who take a position initially and those who initially take the don't know option but are induced subsequently into taking a position (cf. Granberg and Brown 1989).

Our hypothesis is that there is a significant relationship between attitude and behavior among people who initially take a don't know position on an issue but who are subsequently pressed into taking a position. If this hypothesis is supported, we would have evidence that there are false negatives (pseudo-nonattitudes) within the don't know group.

Sweden's Nuclear Power Referendum

The issue to be considered concerns nuclear power as a source of electricity. The data were gathered in the context of a national referendum in Sweden in March 1980 concerning the future of nuclear power (Granberg and Holmberg 1986; Holmberg and Asp 1984). A sample of eligible voters ($N = 1,568$) was interviewed in person during the campaign preceding the referendum. This was from an initial random sample of 1,971, for a response rate of 80 percent. After the referendum, the same people were recontacted and asked to complete and return a brief mailed questionnaire, indicating whether they voted and if so, which line (alternative) they had voted for in the referendum.² Of those interviewed before the referendum, 1,458 (93 percent) returned the mailed questionnaire. Self-reported vote was checked against official records, and a turnout record was found for all but 14 people in the initial sample. When we report data on behavior, only people validated as having actually voted are included. The turnout for the population was 75.6 percent of those eligible to vote, and for this sample it was 77.5 percent. In the referendum, the antinuclear alternative, Line 3, called for no new nuclear power plants to be brought into operation and for the currently operating ones to be phased out within 10 years. This antinuclear alternative received 38.7 percent of the vote. The pronuclear alternatives, Lines 1 and 2, provided for six new nuclear plants to be brought into operation and for the use of nuclear power to continue for about 25 years. Lines 1 and 2 received 18.9 percent and 39.1 percent of the vote, respectively.³ In addition, 3.3 percent cast blank votes. The self-reported vote of the sample closely approximated the outcome of the referendum (Holmberg and Asp 1984).

We use three measures of attitudes toward nuclear power from the preelection interview. People were asked all three questions regardless of how they had answered any previous question. The first was a general question with an easy out alternative: "There are various views regarding nuclear power as an energy source. What is your view? Are you generally for or against the use of nuclear power as an

2. Methodological details concerning this 1980 survey, and the Swedish election study program of which this is a part, are available elsewhere (Alfredsson 1988; Holmberg 1990; Holmberg, Nordlöf, and Gilljam 1985). These election studies have been sponsored by a series of grants from the Swedish government.

3. Line 1 (endorsed by the Social Democratic and Liberal parties) and Line 2 (endorsed by the Conservative party) were only slightly different. Line 2 emphasized public ownership of electricity production, energy conservation, and avoiding the creation of an expanding market for nuclear power. It was judged to be slightly less pronuclear than Line 1, but the gap between Lines 2 and 3 was four times as large as the interval between Lines 1 and 2 (Granberg and Holmberg 1988, p. 232).

energy source in Sweden, or don't you have any particular opinion on this question?" Overall, 47 percent were in favor, 38 percent against, and 15 percent undecided.

On the second item, people were shown an 11-point scale going from -5 (labeled very negative toward nuclear power), through zero (neither positive nor negative) to +5 (very positive toward nuclear power). The interviewer stated, "I want to ask your impression of the position taken by different groups and parties on nuclear power. You can answer with the help of the scale on this card." After giving answers to eight perception questions, people were asked, "Where would you place yourself on this scale?" While lacking an easy out option, an explicitly neutral point on the scale (zero) was provided. On this scale, 46 percent put themselves somewhere on the positive side, 39 percent put themselves on the negative side, 12 percent put themselves at zero, and 3 percent said they did not know where to place themselves. The latter two categories did not differ systematically in any other way we could detect, and therefore were combined.

The third measure asked, "In the political debate various proposals have been put forward as to how we shall use nuclear power in the future. We have summarized some of these proposals and wonder which of them most closely agrees with your opinion?"

- A. We should shut down the nuclear power plants which are now in operation.
- B. We should shut down the nuclear power plants which are now operating within 10 years.
- C. We should phase out nuclear power but use the 12 nuclear reactors that are operating or under construction. When these reactors are worn out, they should not be replaced.
- D. We should use the nuclear power plants that are now operating or under construction but not decide now whether to build additional plants when these are worn out.
- E. We should build more nuclear power plants than the 12 that are operating now or are under construction."⁴

This third question provided no easy out option and no neutral point, and the range of the alternatives in the question was considerably broader than the alternatives in the referendum. The referendum debate centered around alternatives B and C, and none of the main parties advocated a position as extreme as A or E. The percentages endorsing the five alternatives were 10, 28, 28, 28, and 2 for alternatives

4. At the time of the referendum, Sweden had six nuclear plants in operation and another six planned and in various stages of construction. In 1980, Sweden was getting about 5 percent of its energy and 30 percent of its electricity from these nuclear power plants.

A through E, respectively, and the remaining 4 percent said "don't know."

Responses to the three questions were highly correlated. The second and third items were correlated .80. This correlation was .82 among people who took a position on the first question ($N = 1,300$), and it dropped substantially but not to an insignificant level among people who were undecided on the first question ($r = .41$, $N = 168$, $p < .001$). This indicates at least some constraint among people who had earlier said don't know.

Among people who said don't know on the first general question, 58 percent said don't know or put themselves at the neutral point zero on the second question and 23 percent said don't know on the third question. Read the other way, this indicates that of those who were undecided on the first question, 42 percent expressed an attitude on the second question and fully 77 percent expressed a position on the third question on which there was neither an easy out option nor a neutral alternative. Among people who were asked all three questions, only 3 percent said don't know on all three, 7 percent said don't know on two, 12 percent said don't know on one, and 78 percent took a position on all three questions.

Most of those who said don't know on the first question took a position on at least one of the other two questions (80 percent). Our hypothesis, however, was not only that these people would express attitudes but, more important, that these attitudes would be related to subsequent voting behavior. For the sample as a whole, all three of the attitude measures are closely related to the vote in the referendum. For instance, on the first general question, 89 percent of those who said they were against nuclear power voted for the antinuclear Line 3 in the referendum, compared to 34 percent of the people who said don't know and 3 percent of those who said they were for nuclear power. The relationship between where people placed themselves on the 11-point scale and how they voted was very strong ($\eta = .84$). The antinuclear alternative got a relatively small percentage of the vote of people who had placed themselves at the neutral point (27 percent).⁵ For the third attitude question, the percentages voting for the antinuclear Line 3 were 96, 87, 12, 3, and 0 for alternatives A through E, respectively.

The top half of table 2 gives the attitude-vote relationship for people who took a position on the first general question. The bottom half

5. The low percentage of the neutrals voting for the antinuclear alternative is due mainly to the party loyalty of Social Democrats, some of whom may not have known much or cared much about nuclear power but who in the end voted for the alternative favored by their party (Holmberg and Asp 1984).

Table 2. Relationship between Attitude and Voting Behavior in Sweden's Referendum on Nuclear Power among People Who Did and Did Not Express an Attitude on the First General Attitude Question

| Attitude Item and Direction | Percentage Who Voted for | | Total | N |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-------|-----|
| | Pronuclear Lines 1 and 2 | Antinuclear Line 3 | | |
| People <i>with</i> an attitude on the first general item: | | | | |
| 1. 2, negative | 9 | 91 | 100 | 482 |
| 2. 2, positive | 98 | 2 | 100 | 562 |
| 3. 3, negative | 8 | 92 | 100 | 454 |
| 4. 3, positive | 93 | 7 | 100 | 642 |
| People <i>without</i> an attitude on the first general item: | | | | |
| 5. 2, negative | 34 | 66 | 100 | 29 |
| 6. 2, positive | 90 | 10 | 100 | 30 |
| 7. 3, negative | 38 | 62 | 100 | 42 |
| 8. 3, positive | 86 | 14 | 100 | 58 |

NOTE.—The entries are row percentages, giving the percentage of people with a given position on attitude item 2 or 3 who voted for the pronuclear lines or the anti-nuclear line in the nuclear power referendum. The difference between adjacent rows, i.e., between rows 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6, and 7 and 8, is in each instance statistically significant. The wording of all three attitude items is given in the text.

gives the results for people who apparently lacked an attitude on the first question but took a position on the second or third question.

The results are quite clear and support our hypothesis. Among people who said don't know on the initial question, the correlation between their answers to the second item and voting behavior was .42, compared to .87 for those who gave a directional answer to the first item. These correlations are each significantly different from zero ($p < .01$) and also significantly different from each other ($z = 9.61$, $p < .001$; Blalock 1979, pp. 415–25). If we substitute the third attitude question for the second, the correlations are similar (.49 and .85) and the conclusions are the same. For those who would have been classified on the basis of the first question as don't know, their subsequent attitude positions were significantly related to behavior. Thus, it is unlikely that they were all expressing pseudo-attitudes on the second

and third questions, although some of them may have been. At least some of them would have been improperly categorized as don't know, that is, pseudo-nonattitudes (false negatives), if the interviewer had taken the initial don't know as conclusive evidence of no attitude. At the same time, it is also evident in our results that a readily accessible attitude is more strongly correlated with behavior than a relatively inaccessible attitude.⁶

In another comparison, people who said don't know on items 1 and 2 but expressed an attitude on item 3 were significantly more likely to vote (69 percent, $N = 95$) than those who said don't know to all three attitude items (49 percent, $N = 51$, $\chi^2 = 5.10$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). It can be inferred that there were some false negatives among those who said don't know to both items 1 and 2.

Concluding Remarks

On the fundamental matter of detecting whether a person has an attitude, there are two types of error. Some people are false positives in that they appear to have an attitude but really do not. Others are false negatives in that they appear to lack an attitude but really have one. Converse's important articles (1964, 1970) succeeded, perhaps even too well, in calling attention to the problem of false positives, the nonattitude phenomenon, as it has been called. While this is certainly one part of the problem, there is also the second face of Janus.

We have endeavored to demonstrate that the corresponding problem of false negatives is also worthy of consideration. People who appear to have no attitude on first glance often turn out to take a position if they are asked other questions on the same topic. We have shown that these attitudes that turn up only on the follow-up questions are not meaningless. They can be used to predict behavior to a significant degree. We acknowledge, of course, that some of the people who appear to have attitudes, because of what they say on follow-up questions, would be false positives created by the researcher's persistence. Nonetheless, our analysis indicates that many people who respond to an initial question by saying "don't know" or "haven't thought much about it" have relatively inaccessible attitudes rather than no attitudes. A comparable argument could invoke a lack of intensity, and we have no direct evidence that accessibility is the crucial variable.

6. We conducted similar tests on the wage earner fund in Sweden's 1982 election study, the guaranteed jobs issue in the 1976 U.S. election study, and the ideology scale from the 1980, 1984, and 1988 U.S. election studies. While differing in details, our hypothesis was supported in each analysis.

Overall, this problem poses a dilemma that does not admit to an easy solution. The more steps taken to avoid nonattitudes, that is, false positives, by including filter questions, easy out alternatives, and explicitly neutral alternatives, the greater the likelihood of false negatives, and vice versa. We do not see how one of these possibilities could be declared to be generally more serious than the other.

Therefore, when trying to interpret public opinion on some matter, researchers as well as politicians must use some judgment, depending on the context and the nature of the issue under consideration. The strategy implied by Converse's perspective would be not to take too seriously the results of polling questions since they—by all means—include quite a few nonattitudes. The opposite interpretive strategy would be to probe beneath the surface and find out what the don't know people really think, and also—in the best of worlds—solve the problem of why they do not say so.

In closing, we return to the question raised in the title of this article. Should public opinion researchers take don't know for an answer? Our view is that we don't know for sure, but we probably should not. The procedure used on major issues in the Swedish surveys of asking three questions, the first a general question with an easy out, the second with an explicit neutral point but no easy out, and the third with a range of alternatives lacking both a neutral point and an easy out, is certainly worth considering. When all three questions have been posed, a sensitive analyst is then free to divide the sample in a variety of ways and to explore the consequences of doing so.

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