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Title: Results of Experiment on Improving the Accuracy of Self-reported Turnout

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Dataset(s): 1987 Pilot Study

Abstract

Abelson examines 1987 Pilot Study experimental question sequence designed to reduce over-reporting of voter turnout. All survey respondents were asked if they had voted in the last national election, but one-half of the respondent sample was also asked if they had voted in any of the last four national elections. Abelson hypothesized that the second "multiple election" question format would limit over reporting, because it could reduce social pressure to report voting in the last election. The Pilot Study evidence, however, does not support this theory. Checking the accuracy of the respondents' answers against individual voting turnout results, Abelson finds that both the traditional and experimental survey formats lead to comparable over-reporting of turnout. Abelson also compares the Pilot Study responses to turnout reports in the 1986 Post-Election Survey. He finds that reporting inaccuracy increases as elapsed time since the last election increases. Moreover, this inaccuracy is asymmetric, with non-voters "remembering" voting more often than voters "remember" not voting. Again, the different question formats yield similar results. Abelson concludes by suggesting specific wording changes to the National Elections Survey that might yield more accurate turnout data.