

The Impact of “Groups Talk” A Report on the NES 1997 Pilot Study

Virginia Sapiro, University of Wisconsin - Madison
January, 1998

The 1997 Pilot Study included an experiment designed for the developmental purpose of investigating the reactivity of batteries of questions investigating political orientations regarding social groups and public reactions to group politics. This experiment also allows a substantive test of the impact of “groups talk” -- focusing on the differences among social groups, their different problems, and their different political demands and views -- on self-reports of basic political orientations toward politics and social life, including personal and political trust and political interest. In other words, it facilitates investigation of a set of orientations often currently labelled as aspects of “social capital.”

Design

One of the major foci of the 1997 Pilot Study was the investigation of group politics. The major portions of that investigation included (1) a new set of questions designed to test the adequacy of the standard NES “groups close to” battery, (2) a series of group placement items tapping perceptions of different social groups’ stands on important social issues; (3) questions asking for respondents’ judgments of different social groups’ partisan preferences; and (4) an embedded experiment examining the impact of different levels of “group threat,” measured as alternative phrasing of policies supposedly proposed by different social groups. These specific batteries were also backed up by further groups material drawn from previous NES studies, including feelings thermometers and measures of prejudice and stereotype. While the feeling thermometer and closeness batteries mentioned many different social groups, a few were targeted for the special in-depth coverage, including blacks and whites, women and men, gays/lesbians, and Christian fundamentalists.

With such an intensive battery of group-focused material, including some purposely “notched up” to manipulate perceptions of group threat, and others specifically focusing on difference and, by implication, conflict, this seemed a good opportunity to test the reactivity of these measures on other kinds of questions not obviously related to questions of social groups. There are many conceivable effects of these kinds of emotionally-charged, politically sensitive questions on the survey response -- for example, fatigue or hostility -- but here we can probe one possibility suggested by the current debates about group politics in the United States. Can all of this “groups talk” have the impact of alienating people from each other or from a political system that sometimes seems preoccupied with “special interest groups?” Can this intensive discussion of group difference and conflict leave people feeling less trusting of each other and their political system?

The experiment embedded in the 1997 Pilot Study is a simple one. We selected a set of questions from NES core long used to investigate basic political and social orientations of trust, efficacy, and interest as well as a recently used question on similarity among people. For a random half of the sample, this battery was to be administered at the beginning of the survey. For the other half, it was to be administered late in the survey, after all of the “groups talk.” All of the variables chosen for this manipulation were also included the NES 1996 Pre- and/or Post-Election Studies, from which the 1997 respondents were empanelled:¹

V970009: Would you say that you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all? (INTEREST)

V970010: In terms of general attitudes and beliefs, how similar would you say other people are to you -- very similar, somewhat similar, not very similar, or not at all similar? (SIMILAR)

V970011: Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people? (PERSTRUST)

V970012: Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance or would they try to be fair?

V970013: How much of the time can you trust the government in Washington to do what is right -- just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time? (GOVTRUST)

V970014: Please tell me how much you agree with the statement: 'People like me don't have any say in what the government does.' (SAY)

The original design was altered in two ways after the planning stage. First, the early phase of interviewing indicated that the instrument still required cutting; one of the questions eliminated from the survey and therefore this experiment was v970012. Second, the planning committee realized too late to substitute another question that the efficacy question, v970014, required the use of a respondent booklet and therefore could not be moved.² Thus one item in the general political orientations battery remained at the beginning of the survey while the others moved, allowing an important cross-check on the experimental manipulation. As reported below, this unplanned part of the experiment was fortuitous. The design, in the end, allows (1) comparison across subsamples for the general orientations that shifted position (the experimental manipulation itself), (2) comparison across subsamples of the general political orientation that is theoretically related to the others but did not move (SAY; in the early administration it is embedded in the larger battery; in the late administration it is not); and (3) comparison across subsamples of the *same variables* administered in the 1996 pre- and/or -post-election studies, which, of course, should not be affected by the experimental manipulation.

Results

Are the half samples systematically different?

Simple comparisons between the two half samples with respect to age, education, race, type of residential community, income, gender, or party identification suggested that the early administration subsample might have been slightly less urban (t -statistic=1.97). Likewise, in comparisons of feeling thermometers for blacks, whites, Christian fundamentalists, gays and lesbians, labor, and big business, only the feeling thermometer for blacks differed significantly between the two groups (means= 66.39 for early administration, 62.53 for late administration, t -statistic=2.52). The half-samples are substantially similar.

What is the effect of the experimental manipulation at the zero order?

Table 1 shows the simple comparisons in frequencies and means within the experimental variables across treatments, as well as the results for the same variable in the 1996 studies. The variables are presented in the order in which they appeared in the survey.

The distributions and means of the responses to INTEREST, SIMILAR, and GOVTRUST were not significantly different. None of the variables drawn from the 1996 surveys showed differences across "treatments." Thus, we have no evidence that a lengthy battery of questions on social group characteristics and differences affects respondents' political interest or trust or sense of similarity with other people, at least on this general level. At least using these measures, groups talk does not appear generally alienating.

In contrast, personal trust is greater in the late administration of the questions in 1997 (although, as we should expect, not in 1996). Also, respondents have a greater sense that they have a say in politics in the later administration version (although again, as we should expect, not in the 1996 data). Both of these findings are curious from the perspective of the expectations underlying this experiment. Why should personal trust be *enhanced* as a result of a series of questions designed to distinguish among social groups, and even underscore current social and political conflict? Personal trust may be enhanced by becoming acquainted with people from different social groups, but merely underscoring social categorization surely should not (*viz.* Tajfel, et al.). The observation that perceptions of social similarity are not affected by the experimental manipulation suggests that the reasons lie elsewhere. It is possible that PERTRUST is affected by the survey situation itself. It is likely that respondents' feelings of personal trust are enhanced if they are

asked about them late in a survey, once they have established a rapport with the interviewer or at least have gained familiarity with the survey session, rather than when asked at the beginning, when they are still wondering what kinds of questions this stranger is going to ask them.³

The results for SAY are initially the most curious of all; this variable, which is not itself moved, and therefore appears as the first question after the experimental battery in the “early” administration, and the first question in the survey in the “late” administration, shows a different pattern of responses in the two administrations, with people feeling they have more say in the late administration form, when it is the first question asked. Clearly this has nothing to do with the “groups talk” (unless these respondents are clairvoyant), but must have something to do with the context.

Do the results differ across groups?

It is plausible that the experimental manipulation would affect people differently, depending on their social context, psychological resources, orientations toward social groups, etc. Thus, each (1997) variable was checked for mean difference across formats using the following control variables:⁴ education, gender, race (white, nonwhite), type of residential community (city, suburb, outlying area), generation (“came of age” before the 1960s, during the 1960s-1970s, since 1980), political awareness (based on 1996 political knowledge questions), party identification, entertainment television watching, political activism (1996 campaign acts), social activism (1996 questions on voluntarism, jury service, church participation, etc.), emotionalism (based on responses to emotion attribution questions for both Clinton and Dole in 1996), egalitarianism (1996), humanitarianism (1996), degree of response or neutrality to social groups (based on a set of feeling thermometers, folded at the middle to distinguish between neutrality and response), and positive or negative reactions to social groups (based on a set of contrasting feeling thermometers to measure generally positive or negative responses to social groups). Overall, there is no clear general pattern of particular groups that were especially responsive to the experimental manipulation, although different groups did respond differently in the case of specific variables.

First let us consider the variables that showed no general shift across the two conditions (INTEREST, SIMILAR, GOVTRUST). The less politically aware, women, and city dwellers were significantly *less interested* in politics if questioned in the late administration. Residents of outlying communities, respondents of the youngest generation, and moderately politically active respondents felt *less similar* to other people if questioned in the late administration. For both of these questions, then, there is scattered suggestion that some specific groups may indeed become alienated by “groups talk.” The case of GOVTRUST is different. City-dwellers, highly politically active respondents, and those who display a marked lack of positive or negative reaction to specific social groups in the feeling thermometers display *more political trust* in the later administration. In each of these cases, however, these respondents as a group showed relatively low levels of political trust in the early administration. Thus in the late administration, these respondents looked much like others in their level of trust. One group stands out in contrast to the rest; residents of outlying areas had relatively high levels of political trust if asked in the early administration; if asked later in the survey their trust was significantly lower.

PERSTRUST was responsive to the experimental manipulation in that respondents showed more trust in other people if asked later in the survey. Further analysis shows, as we might expect, that the effects varied across groups. In fact, the difference was statistically significant among men, the 60's-'70s generation, those without college education, suburban dwellers, the less politically aware, respondents lower in social involvement and political activity, those with more neutral feelings toward social groups and those who are colder in their feelings toward social groups, respondents lower in egalitarianism and (in apparent contrast to the direction of these other variables), those higher in humanitarianism. In most of these cases the group that was most responsive to the experimental manipulation was also markedly low in personal trust if they were questioned early in the survey, suggesting once again that the effect was probably not due to the actual content of the survey, but to the early and late placement itself.⁵

Finally, as we have seen, respondents' view that they have a say in government was greater when this question was "orphaned" by the late administration of the experimental questions than when it was embedded in a larger series about trust and social relationships. This result was statistically significant only within certain groups: men, the '60s-'70s generation, whites, suburban dwellers, Independents, the politically unaware, those who watch a lot of entertainment television, those who respond to politics especially emotionally, and those low in egalitarianism, low in humanitarianism, high in neutrality and in warmth toward social groups. Why do these groups claim they have a say in government with such alacrity if asked off the top and become more moderated when the question is embedded? Can anyone on the Board come up with an answer before I revise this?

Conclusions and Recommendations

"Groups talk" does not have a blanket effect on general political orientations, at least where the content is balanced as in the case here. Specific groups may become alienated by discussion of social group characteristics and differences, but what kinds of people show what responses depends on what specific question we are asking. If our content focused on a less balanced set of groups, for example only racial groups, the results might have been different.

There are strong hints that sheer item placement had effects in this experiment; that is, for example, the personal trust item may well have picked up the elevated suspicions of particular kinds of respondents early in the survey, and such suspiciousness may have been alleviated in the course of the survey experience.

No clear recommendations for survey design are suggested except that radical change in item location are unwise, and questions like personal trust should not open a survey.

More research is needed to determine whether less balanced questioning about social groups might have more comprehensive effects on respondents' general orientations.

Table 1
Simple Comparisons

	97 EARLY	97 LATE	96PRE EARLY	96PRE LATE	96POST EARLY	96POST LATE
Interest						
0	5.8	11.2	10.2	10.2		
1	22.9	21.4	25.8	28.4		
2	42.9	41.3	42.2	38.5		
3	28.4	26.1	21.8	22.9		
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0		
Mean (SE)	1.94 (.052)	1.82 (.057)	1.76 (.055)	1.74 (.056)		
	Mean Diff.: T-stat: 1.50		Mean Diff.: T-stat=0.19			
Similar						
0	3.3	3.6	2.6	2.5		
1	12.7	16.7	16.8	14.5		
2	74.9	66.5	69.6	69.6		
3	9.1	13.1	11.0	13.4		
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0		
Mean (SE)	1.90 (.035)	1.89 (.040)	1.89 (.037)	1.94 (.037)		
	Mean Diff.: T-stat: .14		Mean Diff: T-stat: .92			
Personal Trust						
0	48.5	37.7	59.3	55.4	46.7	40.4
1	1.5	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
2	50.0	60.9	40.5	44.6	53.3	59.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mean (SE)	1.01 (.060)	1.23 (.058)	.81 (.98)	.89 (.10)	1.07 (.061)	1.19 (.059)
	Mean Diff.: T-state=2.60		Mean Diff.: T-stat=.96		Mean Diff.: T-stat=1.49	
Trust Gov't						
0	0.7	0.4	1.8	1.8		
1	66.5	60.7	68.4	69.5		
2	31.3	37.5	28.7	27.3		
3	1.5	1.5	1.1	2.2		
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0		
Mean (SD)	1.33 (.031)	1.40 (.032)	1.29 (.031)	1.31 (.032)		
	Mean Diffs.: T-stat: 1.47		Mean Diffs.: T-stat=0.33			

SAY						
0	12.7	10.9	16.4	10.2	12.7	14.5
1	41.5	34.4	40.4	34.2	32.0	26.8
2	11.3	8.0	7.6	8.0	9.8	7.6
3	26.5	31.9	22.9	25.5	34.2	39.5
4	8.0	14.9	12.9	13.0	11.3	11.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mean (SD)	1.76 (.073)	2.05 (.078)	1.75 (.080)	1.82 (.082)	1.99 (.077)	2.07 (.079)
	Mean Diffs.: T-stat: 2.79		Mean Diffs.: T-stat: .60		Mean Diffs.: T-stat: .69	

Notes: "96A"

Endnotes

1. The text of each question is followed by the variable name used in this report. When I report comparisons with the 1996 Election Study, each variable name is appended with an indication of which study is the source of the data, e.g. SAY97 (1997 Pilot), SAY96PRE (1996 Pre-Election), SAY96PST (1996 Post-Election).
2. Although v970014 could theoretically be administered without a visual, the potential use of the panel and comparison to previous administrations of this core item required preserving the format. The question could not be moved because it would require asking respondents to skip around the respondent booklet, a choice that would have been very disruptive.
3. In other NES surveys these questions appear later in the survey. For example, in the 1996 Pre-Election instrument, INTEREST is in the “E” series of questions, GOVTRUST and SAY in “M,” PERSTRUST in “N,” and SIMILAR in “R.”
4. The specific coding and SPSS syntax statements for each is available from the author, as are the tables for the results discussed below.
5. This also suggests a plausible explanation for the results with respect to humanitarianism. Respondents scoring high on humanitarianism were more trusting than other respondents in the early administration; these respondents, with a tendency to view their fellow humans favorably in any case, warmed up more during the interview than their fellow respondents did.