

## Political Participation: A 1998 NES Pilot Study

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The 1998 NES Pilot Study included several items and experimental manipulations focusing on political participation. The goal was to answer specific questions about the manner in which campaign participation is measured in NES studies. (1) Does asking separate questions about campaign donations to political parties and to candidates elicit enough information to be worth asking two questions? (2) Could participation questions be asked in a manner that provides more detailed information about levels of political participation than the traditional dichotomous questions provide? If items tapping extent of participation were incorporated, could such items also maintain continuity for purposes of continuing the time series? (3) How would the more detailed measures compare with dichotomous measures in terms of reliability and validity? This memo addresses each of these questions in turn.

### *Candidate Donations versus Party Donations*

A random split-half design was used to assess whether asking separate questions about donations to parties (v98p192 and v98p193 or v98p204) and donations to candidates (v98p190 and v98p191 or v98p203) produced different results from a single item incorporating both types of donations (v98p194 and v98p195 or v98p205). The results show that aggregating the results from the two separate questions produces the same results as a single combined question. In the former case, 12.0% of the (623) respondents claimed to have donated money; in the latter case 11.9% of the (631) respondents did. There is, of course, added information from asking two separate questions; of those who were asked separately about party and candidate contributions 5.9% claimed to have made donations only to candidates, 2.2% said they made donations only to parties, and 3.9% said they had made donations to both. But given the meager percentage of contributors and the fact that the combined approach requires only one question, this would seem to be the most efficient way to measure donations in future NES surveys. In subsequent analyses we utilized either the single item or comparable two-item combined measure for purposes of assessing the extent of contributions.

### *Dichotomous Measures Versus Incorporating Extent of Participation*

The traditional NES measures of participation ask simply whether the respondent has participated in each of a series of activities: talk to people and try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates; display a campaign button, campaign sticker, or sign; attend meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners; do any other work; and contribute money. (The traditional NES questions are represented here as v98p181, v98p183, v98p185, v98p187, plus the donations questions discussed above.) In order to test the possible use of a more informative measure, we developed a measure of *extent* of participation for each form of activity. In the case of talking to others, attending meetings, and doing “other” work respondents were asked the *frequency* of these activities. In the case of displays of buttons, bumper stickers, and signs, they were asked *how many* of these types of

displays they did. In the case of donations, we asked about the amount. The Pilot Study included an experimental manipulation in which half the sample received the traditional NES question plus a follow-up tapping amount if they did participate, while the other half received a new question that incorporated whether they engaged in the activity at all and the amount.

#### *Dichotomous measures versus incorporating extent: Continuity*

Using a split-half design manipulating whether people are asked about the usual forms of participation in a discrete (yes/no) fashion or in terms of the frequency/extent of participation, we first tried to determine whether a single extent question could substitute for the dichotomous items without disturbing the continuity of the time series. Is the percentage of people who claim to participate at all in each type of activity equivalent across the two different forms of question?

As shown in Table 1, for two types of participation -- talking to others and attending meetings, the extended version appears to encourage people to report that they participated. Although it does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, there may also be a tendency for a change in forms to boost appearances of donating money. Whichever form is more accurate, changing the form would lead to a false appearance of boosted political participation.

Table 1 here

#### *Incorporating Extent: Separate versus Single Questions*

We tested two different versions of eliciting information on the amount of people's participation as well as whether they participated. In Table 2 we compare the results using the format that asks whether people participated and, if so, following with a probe for amount versus eliciting all this information in one question. We exclude respondents who did not participate, asking only whether the amount of participation among participants is reported differently across the two forms. The reported amount of talking is significantly greater where two questions are used as is the amount of donation. Considering this result in tandem with those reported in Table 1, it is clear that with the extended measure, in these cases we get more people saying they participated a little. Whether the form of the question changes the perceived threshold of what constitutes participation, or whether it allows people to present themselves as participants without making claims more grandiose than they are willing to make, we cannot tell.

Table 2 here

#### *Dichotomous measures versus incorporating extent of participation: Description and Reliability*

It is common practice for scholars using NES studies to sum the number of campaign acts in which respondents participated to construct a scale of "campaign participation." The major point of our exercise is to find out whether we can provide the elements of a more useful scale, which would incorporate the amount of participation as well as whether people happened to do two different things during the campaign, such as buy a 50 cent button and talk to a neighbor once.

Using information from the split halves, it was possible to create four versions of the scale, based, respectively, on : (1) dichotomous measures constructed from a dichotomous question, (2) dichotomous measure constructed from the “extent” questions, (3) continuous measures constructed from dichotomous questions and follow-up questions on extent, and (4) continuous measures constructed from the extent questions.

Table 3 presents descriptive information on the four scales, including reliability analysis. Clearly, while the continuous scales offer more information, they have very long, thin tails. In terms of reliability analysis, the alphas do not offer much basis for choosing among scales.

Table 3 here

#### *Dichotomous measures versus incorporating extent of participation: Validity*

We selected a set of variables that are conventionally expected to be associated with political participation to compare the relationships across the different versions of the scales. The results are displayed in the form of correlations in Table 4. Given the greater expense of the follow-up questions, we see no greater purchase from changing the conventional set of NES questions.

#### *Appendix: Experimental Manipulation*

This study depended on two different randomized split half manipulations; the “main” one, which distinguished between respondents given the dichotomous questions plus follow-up versus the single extended question form, and the “secondary” split half, which distinguished between respondents given the donations questions for candidate and party separately or in a single question. In order to check the subsamples resulting from the manipulations, we ran t-test comparisons for education, age, and gender. Education is a four-point measure, indicating whether respondents had less than a high school education, a high school degree, some higher education, a B.A., or an advanced degree. Age is coded as actual age, and gender is the standard dichotomous indicator.

*Main condition:* The two main subsamples did not differ significantly with respect to gender ( $t= 1.34$ , ns) or education ( $t=0.09$ , ns), but the sample receiving the extended questions was slightly younger than the sample receiving the dichotomous question with probe ( $t=3.49$ ,  $p=.001$ ). This difference is unlikely to affect the substantive results in any noticeable way.

*Secondary condition:* We ran separate t-tests for the secondary condition within each of the main-subsamples. There were no significant difference within either main condition when we compared the secondary subsamples with respect to gender, age, or education.

**Table 1**  
**Percent Participation: Dichotomous versus Extent Forms**

|                               | Dichotomous | Extent | Chi-square   |
|-------------------------------|-------------|--------|--------------|
| Talk to others                | 22.1%       | 37.0%  | 31.65 (.000) |
| Display buttons               | 13.8        | 13.4   | 0.04 (ns)    |
| Attend meetings               | 6.4         | 11.6   | 10.01 (.002) |
| Work for candidate            | 3.2         | 5.1    | 2.82 (ns)    |
| Give money to candidate/party | 10.1        | 13.5   | 3.35 (.067)  |
| Sample size                   | (596)       | (605)  |              |

Note: Number of valid cases varies slightly across variables.

**Table 2**  
**Extent: Separate versus Single Questions**

|                  | Separate     | Combined |                  | Separate    | Combined |
|------------------|--------------|----------|------------------|-------------|----------|
| <b>Talk</b>      |              |          | <b>Money</b>     |             |          |
| 1. Once or twice | 37.1         | 50.7     | 1. < \$25        | 15.0        | 32.1     |
| 2. 3 or 4 times  | 23.5         | 26.9     | 2. \$25-\$99     | 48.3        | 43.2     |
| 3. >4 times      | 39.4         | 22.4     | 3. >\$100        | 36.7        | 24.7     |
| Chi square (p=)  | 12.03 (.002) |          | Chi square (p=)  | 5.92 (.052) |          |
| (N)              | (355)        |          | (N)              | (141)       |          |
| <b>Display</b>   |              |          | <b>Work</b>      |             |          |
| 1. One form      | 84.1         | 74.6     | 1. Once or twice | 42.1        | 54.8     |
| 2. Two forms     | 13.4         | 21.0     | 2. 3 or 4 times  | 21.1        | 12.9     |
| 3. Three forms   | 2.4          | 7.4      | 3. >4 times      | 36.8        | 32.3     |
| Chi square (p=)  | 4.23 (ns)    |          | Chi square (p=)  | .944 (ns)   |          |
| (N)              | (163)        |          | (N)              | (50)        |          |
| <b>Meet</b>      |              |          |                  |             |          |
| 1. Once or twice | 76.3         | 77.1     |                  |             |          |
| 2. 3 or 4 times  | 10.5         | 12.9     |                  |             |          |
| 3. >4 times      | 13.2         | 10.0     |                  |             |          |
| Chi square (p=)  | .334 (ns)    |          |                  |             |          |
| (N)              | (108)        |          |                  |             |          |

**Table 3**  
**Participation Scale Construction: Description and Reliability**

| Dichotomous Items,<br>Separate Questions<br>(Traditional NES) |            | Dichotomous Items,<br>Extended Question |            |
|---|------------|---|------------|
| 0. 65.7%  | N=592      | 0. 52.9                                 | N=597      |
| 1. 22.3   | Mean= 0.55 | 1. 28.0                                 | Mean= 0.80 |
| 2. 6.4  | SD= .960   | 2. 10.6                                 | SD=1.10    |
| 3. 3.2  | %=.61      | 3. 5.0                                  | %= .62     |
| 4. 1.5  |            | 4. 2.0                                  |            |
| 5. 0.8  |            | 5. 1.5                                  |            |
| Continuous Items<br>Separate Questions                        |            | Continuous Items<br>Extended Question   |            |
| 0. 65.9   |            | 0. 52.9                                 |            |
| 1. 11.4   | N=590      | 1. 18.1                                 | N=597      |
| 2. 8.1  | Mean= 0.97 | 2. 10.4                                 | Mean=1.31  |
| 3. 6.1  | SD= 1.91   | 3. 6.4                                  | SD=2.16    |
| 4. 2.5  | %=.62      | 4. 4.5                                  | %=.68      |
| 5. 2.0  |            | 5. 3.2                                  |            |
| 6. 1.0  |            | 6. 1.3                                  |            |
| 7. 0.8  |            | 7. 1.0                                  |            |
| 8. 0.8  |            | 8. 0.7                                  |            |
| 9. 0.8  |            | 10. 0.2                                 |            |
| 13. 0.2   |            | 11. 0.3                                 |            |
| 15. 0.2   |            | 12. 0.5                                 |            |
|   |            | 13. 0.2                                 |            |
|   |            | 14. 0.2                                 |            |
|   |            | 15. 0.2                                 |            |

**Table 4**  
**Political Participation and Related Variables**

|  | Dichotomous Items, Separate Questions (Traditional NES) | Dichotomous Items, Extended Question | Continuous Items, Separate Questions | Continuous Items Separate Questions |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Gender                                   | -.11**  | -.15*                                | -.12**                               | -.15*                               |
| Age                                      | .10**   | .10***                               | .08***                               | .12**                               |
| Education                                | .10***  | .08***                               | .11**                                | .08                                 |
| Follow politics (v98p376)                | .26*  | .31*                                 | .26*                                 | .31*                                |
| Discuss politics (v98p114, v98p115)      | .30*  | .29*                                 | .32*                                 | .29*                                |
| Attention to election (v98p106, v98p107) | .23*  | .29*                                 | .24*                                 | .25*                                |
| Important to have opinions               | .03   | .06                                  | .04                                  | .06                                 |
| Have opinions                            | .11*  | .12**                                | .14***                               | .13**                               |
| Have more or less opinions than most     | .19*  | .14*                                 | .19*                                 | .16*                                |

\* p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<001