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Abstract:

The 2006 NES Pilot contains various questions assessing trust in government designed with two main purposes: to improve upon existing wording of the ANES trust question and to evaluate the extent to which responses vary according to the object of citizens' trust which include the decision-making process, resulting policy outcomes, and level of government. Despite considerable scholarly attention paid to political trust, there is no consensus on how to measure the underlying concept. Most measures of trust have been derived from the original battery of five questions included in the 1958 NES. While the five-point scale is an improvement over the standard item, it still needs refinement to indicate ranges rather than discrete points and reconsideration of the wording for the most-of-the-time response. The percent-of-the-time question is straightforward, more precise, does a better job of discriminating by frequency of trust, and performs at least as well (and frequently better) than the alternatives. We believe the standard ANES question is flawed and should be phased out, but it warrants inclusion on the ANES along with the percent-of-the-time question at least through 2008. Including both questions will tell us what respondents mean when they answer the standard NES trust question. Thus, the extent to which change in trust is obscured by the standard measure can be determined by including both questions in a panel design, such as the 2008 ANES.