ANES Open-ended Questions: Wording, Coding Procedures, and Uses
Jon Krosnick

Thank you for your patience during that transition. Welcome from me. I'm absolutely delighted after many months of thinking about putting this event together – to see this room filled with you all and to have achieved the transatlantic transportation of many of our participants successfully. We were worried about Italia Airlines going on strike recently and canceling flights and then not canceling them and canceling them again. I can tell you from experience that Travelocity is very good when you have a problem like this in solving it. This is not an endorsement, just a positive statement.

I want to echo a theme that Skip alluded to earlier which is this conference is happening because of Jim Gibson and my former colleague at Ohio State, Greg Caldera, who took the liberty of looking into the hood of the American National Election Studies in a way that wasn't easy but turned out to be terrifically valuable. Really the themes that Skip and I have had in running the project over the last few years has been occasionally kicking over rocks and finding worms under there. In this particular case Jim started to lift the rock a little bit and we kicked it over and found lots of worms.

What we are doing here today and tomorrow is to really help us move the study forward in a better way. So Skip and I work really well as a team together. He is the thoughtful diplomatic guy and I am the more blunt guy. I will say just a couple more additions to the comments he made earlier. Of course those who work with survey data and particularly open-ended survey data know the reason that data get released in coded categories is because analysts don't want to get a thousand different responses to a question. It is really analytic convenience that drives us to categories and allows the analysis to be efficient later.

Skip's discussion of the fact that there is a concern about releasing open-ended text and confidentiality of respondents, I think that has been truthful for our project I don't know if we really know that is a theme that has governed other projects. We will have comments during this conversation from others who run big studies and have open-ended text and we would love to hear your views about the ethics and the risks involved there on that theme as well.

Just to make it really clear – the literature that has compared open-ended questions to closed-ended questions – in terms of practicalities and validities – what we know is that open-ended questions are a painin practical terms. To ask an open-ended question takes at least twice as long to ask the same question as closed-ended. That might surprise you – you would think it should take a lot longer to ask it open-ended. But in fact with a closed-ended question you have to take the time to read to the respondent a bunch of answer choices, most of which they are not going to pick. So there is some time taken by that process. If you simply state the question you are interested in in an open-ended form the interviewer doesn't take up that amount of time. Furthermore for most closed-ended questions the respondent has to answer in open-ended question in his or her own mind first.

So if I ask you what is the most important problem we are facing in the country today – is it unemployment, inflation, the budget deficit, the war in Iraq, education or something else? The first thing you have to decide is what is the most important thing today facing the country and then see if it is in the list or not and if not, decide – what you are really supposed to do is pick something from the list because the researcher is only really interested in them – or should you volunteer something in the other slot and so on. So you can see why it might be a little simpler than it may seem to ask an open-ended question and in fact the literature supports the evidence that open-ended question data tend to be more reliable and more valid than closed-ended question data.

Despite the fact that with the open-ended question, you rely on the interviewer to do perfect transcription of the answers and you rely on coders later to actually categorize those answers. If you

could make those later processes – the transcription, the coding – even better than they are now – it might even help that quality data even more. That is the motivation why we worry about this.

Interestingly, as I will show you in a second, the ANES has asked a lot of kinds of open-ended questions over the years. Our colleagues at the National Longitudinal Surveys and GSS – when we contacted them about co-sponsoring this conference with us – they said they would be happy to do it, but they only have one open-ended question on the survey – occupation. So we are much more in this business than they are, but obviously you are in this business as well, and so we will pitch what comes in terms of our concerns but of course they apply to yours as well.

Let me be very clear that by the end of Friday, Skip and I have a particular burden – we have to know how we are going to code our next round of open-ended data. So we are relying on you and the presentations and the discussions and the throwing around of ideas to help us reach that resolution. We will be very grateful if you will help us as much as you can in thinking about the fact that we have to decide what coding categories to use; how to actually implement a set of coding categories, either by humans or by machine; and finally how to access the reliability and accuracy of whatever code we do. So that is what we could use some help on.

Interestingly when we have talked to coding departments at Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan or RTI or other big survey organizations that do coding regularly – we ask them how they do it. They say that they have a person. We give them the coding, and they assign the coding categories. We check to make sure they do it right. We ask them how they do that. They say they do spot checking. The supervisor will look at one and say is this the right category? Yes it is, fine, keep going. It is a pretty informal process for the vast majority of the time. Yet it turns out that in psychology in particular, there is a long tradition of much more effortful multiple coder processes and reliability and then there is the big tradition of machine coding that has been growing in recent years. So there is in some sense the survey community is pretty far behind the curve. We are hoping to yank them up to speed with your help over the next few days.

I've told you the themes. Now what I would like to do very briefly is to acquaint you a little bit with the open-ended questions that we have, just how burdensome our coding categories can be, and also the kinds of uses the data get put to so you can be on our wavelength. I want to walk you through quickly some of the wordings.

One of the most frequently analyzed sets of questions gets referred to as likes and dislikes. This version of them happens to be about presidential candidates. It says – "Is there anything in particular about George W. Bush that might make you want to vote for him and is there anything that might make you vote against him?" Then we asked the same questions about the other major party candidate. You can imagine that when you ask a question like this, you get all kinds of different answers. The goal is to deal with them somehow. Dave RePass will talk about that in some detail.

We also ask questions like this about certain candidates running for Congress – where the questions are worded a little differently – "Was there anything in particular that you liked about this candidate?" In other words, the one about Bush, being asked why you voted for or against him, and this one asked about likes or dislikes. Here is a version focused on political parties – "Is there anything in particular that you like about the Democratic Party?" "What is it?" In each of these cases, the interviewers probe extensively to get lots of answers.

Here are vice presidential candidates, what about them? Aside from their parties do you have any strong opinions about either of them, how is that? That gets coded as an open-ended answer. Here is one about the Supreme Court – is there any Supreme Court Justice in particular who you feel is doing a good job, would you tell me about that? So we can get all kind of text in response about that. Here

is another one about Ronald Regan. Ronald Regan was elected president in November, 1980. He took office in January, 1981. He will soon be leaving office. Is there anything in particular that you like about what he has done as president or anything you don't like about what he has done as president? This transitions us into the second category.

These are questions about important problems and have been asked at many different levels. What do you think are the most important problems facing this country? People mention up to 3 of them. The interviewer says of those that you have mentioned, what would you say is the single most important problem the country faces? This gets lots of use. This question goes back to George Gallup, 70 years ago maybe, starting to ask folks this type of question in their surveys. Here is another different version – in the campaign in this district for the US House of Representatives, what would you say was the single most important issue to you? That is a little different.

Here is something about people's personal lives – we like to have people tell us about what sorts of problems they have to deal with in their daily lives – can you tell me what some of the problems that you face these days in your own life? Or foreign relations – what do you think are the most important problems in our relations with other countries throughout the world that the United States is facing? So you are getting the flavor for how this goes. I will skip over some of these.

Now we have questions about differences. Do you think there are any important differences in what the republicans and democrats stand for and what are those differences? Again you can imagine there will be a very large and heterogeneous set of answers. Here are questions about the meanings of these two terms – people have different things in mind when they say people's political views are liberal and conservative. We would like to know more about this. Let's start with liberal – what sorts of things do you have in mind when you say someone's political views are liberal? And then the same thing for conservatives.

This is about political parties – which party is more conservative and what do you have in mind when you say that the Democrats are more conservative than Republicans? This is focused on war – looking ahead do you think the problem of keeping out of a bigger war would be better handled by Democrats or Republicans or about the same? Here is the open-ended point – why is that? You get follow ups like this – how do you feel about this? Some people think that since the end of the last world war the country has gone too far in concerning themselves with problems in other parts of the world. A very wide open possible set of answers to that.

Now this is a set of questions that are quite common to lots of surveys – what kind of work did you do on your last regular job? What were your most important activities or duties? What kind of business or industry was that? Answers to these standardized questions fit people into jobs and industries. We have the same thing for the respondent's spouse. We have the same thing about the head of the household in case there are multiple people. We get the same thing about the respondent's father and mother. Think about that for a second. Think about trying to describe your father's work or your mother's work. It is different than describing your own. You may get different levels of specificity.

Here are a series of open questions that deal with financial issues. We are interested in how people are getting along these days. Would you say that you and your family are better off or worse off than a year ago? Why do you say that? Again, we need categories for that. Here is the last one I will show you before I move on. Government might help people get doctors and hospital care at low cost – do you have an opinion on this issue or not? The introduction isn't here but it says something about reading an opinion and asking for your view about it. People were asked why they felt that way. I won't spend time on this but this is what Skip showed you and Jim will talk about – where people are asked what job or office Trent Lott held or Prime Minister Tony Blair. You get the feel.

What I want to do next, just to give you a sense of our burden – thanks to the discovery that came out of Jim and Greg's work – we are now looking at having to go back to the beginning of the history of ANES and recode all of the open-ended data properly. Just to get a feel for the volume of work that needs to go on – let me show you – here are the likes/dislikes questions. We have been asked these political party questions in the years where the X's are next to them – back to 1952 to the present. Think of each of these as multiple thousands of respondents. Questions about political party candidate likes and dislikes goes back to 1952. Candidates running for Congress goes back to 1974. Vice presidential candidates asked in a couple of years. Senators asked just in one year. The Supreme Court asked in just one although it might be interesting to do it again. And then the question about Ronald Regan. The question about what is the most important problem facing the country started in 1960 asked in all these years. The most important problem in the respondent's district asked in these years. In their personal life here.

So you can see there are a bunch of open-ended questions that used to get asked in the old days and haven't been asked frequently. One wonders why did they disappear? What happened? Did people not use them? Were there problems with the coding?

The difference between republicans and democrats, liberals and conservatives – the party differences – the questions have been asked many times. Meanings of liberals and conservatives have been asked many times. Why is a party more conservative than others – and so on? Some of these other issues – why has the U.S. position grown stronger or weaker in the world? Each of these X's are cases in which we perhaps need to do more coding. Here is the occupation and industry. Questions about financial issues. What you are seeing is actually quite typical of other surveys. Content analysis of other surveys shows open-ended questions were much more common decades ago than they are these days. It may be one of our missions for this conference to make it clear that it is possible to do them well.

Jim is going to talk about what started in the '80's and continued quite consistently. The number of X's understates the tremendous impact these questions have had in our literature. They have been used a ton and are a centerpiece of claims about folks. I didn't show you questions about what is your ethnic group or nationality. What is your race? What religion are you? Each of these are asked in open-ended forms as well.

The last thing I am going to do very quickly is to give you a feel for the kinds of analysis people have done with these data. So we will start with the likes/dislike questions which you saw before – I just want to give you a little tiny window into the coding categories. There is a handout. If you didn't get it, you don't need it right now. It has lots of data. Joe stayed up very late last night doing a lot of things to make this conference happen. Yesterday it turns out was his birthday and he was staying up at a really late hour working on this so we need to show even more gratitude than he might have seen otherwise. We are hoping he is going to really celebrate this weekend.

This double sided set shows the kind of coding categories that we have had for many of these questions I have just showed you. You might have said – that is a lot of codes – where did they come from? The answer is – we don't know. The people who wrote them are no longer around. The people working on the studies are not working on them anymore. Take a look at it; you will see what the burden looks like. This is the kind of thing that comes out of it. Here is a paper in which there is an analysis done over the years beginning in 1962 up to 2000. The blue line – these are questions about republicans and democrats and it is a focus on something called personal qualities.

Looking at what you like about the candidates, how often are people saying they like something about the person or they dislike something about the person? The important thing to see is that the author's interest is in the blue line going up in some years and going down in some years. And the black line going up and down similarly. The argument that they make is that in some years voters are focused

on the candidates as people and in other years they are focused on other aspects of the candidate, policies for example. So that is one type of analysis one would want to do. Obviously if one were doing this type of analysis one would hope that the data produced for 1958 were coded in exactly the same way as the data produced in 2000. We have some reason to believe that was necessarily done.

Unfortunately you can't read these, so you'll have to take my word for it. You have the open-ended codes that have been put into categories. Here they are called ideology comments, group comments, and comments about other things. If you could see this you would see there are percentages put into each of these categories. So lots of categories get put into bunches. Here are more graphs – looking at trends over time and the percent of comments made in particular categories. These are the questions about what you like about your own party and what you dislike about the other party. You can see that they are bunched into these categories – management, philosophy and groups. These percentages are being compared across different respondents – conservatives, democrats, republicans and so on. So there is a real interest in looking at the types of comments and categorizing them to do analysis.

This is the most important thing facing the country. This line here is that welfare is a problem and this line is poverty as a problem. So you can see this same question has been asked across all these years and someone did this coding to put them into these buckets. Researchers are looking quantitatively at shifts in these numbers over time. Here is one last example – this is the proportion of issues mentioned and each of the years is across the bottom. The black bars are the economy or business; social welfare is the next one over; public war or crime and that kind of stuff; foreign affairs; and the functioning of government is the last one. So you can see the comparisons with any year – are people talking about this or this? This became the dominant theme but this was the dominant theme there. But also we can compare the black bars across time or the hatch bars. That is where we want to move to – that kind of content analysis. To do it we have to do it reliably.

As Skip will now talk about, we also want to do it in a way that breaks completely with the tradition in this field, and that is to do it transparently.