

Can Asking Questions Alter Voter Behavior?

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I'm going to talk this morning about a line of research that I've been doing. It's been interesting listening to all of the talks yesterday and this morning. I think that one thing that's quite interesting to me is that we are talking about this ANES as a way to ask questions and gather information as social scientists, which of course, that's the typical perspective that we all have.

The line of research that I'm going to present this morning suggests a slightly different perspective on asking questions, and that is by the simple act of asking questions, we may in fact be changing the respondent's behavior. So I'll start by presenting a series of studies that are not in a voting or election context, and then I'll close by talking about a couple that are. So you'll see a little evidence outside the domain and then evidence within the domain, and a lot of collaborators on this that deserve many thanks, including David Neal who is here in the back. David is a postdoc here at Duke.

The typical perspective, of course, is that we ask questions and we're gathering information. There is a long line of research that has shown the act of asking questions — the way in which we ask questions can bias participants' responses, but I'm going to go a step further here this morning and talk about how asking the questions can change actual behavior. I'll describe two lines of research. One is a simple intention question, so I'll simply say, "How likely are you to do something," and then observe behavior. And another is a hypothetical question so "If you found out that blah, blah, blah, would you be more or less likely to?" and observe behavior based on that. Both of these, I think of them as very similar in terms of outcome, but the process is a little different. I'll give you examples of both.

The first real study in this domain Jim Sherman did, and it's a great paper. He called it the *Separation Error of Prediction*. Basically, what Jim did is he asked people about their willingness to volunteer for the American Cancer Society, and what he found was that people way over-predicted their likelihood of volunteering. So 48 percent of people asked said that they would volunteer, and the base rate of actual volunteering behavior was only four percent. So people are socially desirable, and they're socially presenting them and way over-predict. But the really interesting thing was that later those that were asked about their willingness to volunteer, that we later went back to and actually asked to volunteer, was 31 percent of them. So it went from a base rate of four percent to 31 percent of people who actually engaged in the behavior, simply because they were asked a question.

Another collaborator of mine asked the following question in a large nationally representative study. "How likely are you to purchase an automobile in the next six months?" She then went back and tracked actual automobile purchase behavior, and found that those that were asked versus those that were not asked —

those that were not asked, 2.4 percent of them actually bought an automobile. Those that were asked, 3.3 percent of them bought an automobile. We're talking about 30 or 40 percent increase in actual automobile purchased as a function of one question asked in a panel once. Now, this is a panel that wasn't just the one question. There were a series of questions. They got 20 questions. This one question was about automobiles, and there was another question in there about personal computers and found similar kinds of increases in personal computer purchases. They're very seemingly innocuous questions leading to these huge impacts.

So how might this be operating? So if I go back to Jim's paper, the valence of the behavior seems to matter a lot. So if you look at the positive behavior, volunteering for the American Cancer Society goes from four percent of the people that weren't asked the question, and up to 31 percent if they were. Taking that slightly less positive behavior, singing the "Star-Spangled Banner" over the telephone — for most of us it's not such a positive thing. So if you're asked to do that — again, no previous intention measured. It was 72 percent of people that did it, which is, in and of itself, kind of interesting. I think this 72 percent of people agreed to sing the "Star-Spangled Banner" over the telephone.

If they had been asked in advance an intention question, then that dropped down to 40 percent, so the valence matters. If it's a positive and you're asked a question, it leads to an increase in the behavior. If it's a negative and you're asked a question, it leads to a decrease in the behavior.

Similarly, related to the study on automobiles Ricky and I went back and looked at what happens in terms of can you predict by asking a category-level question, 'How likely are you to buy an automobile' what happens at the brand level? So from category to subcategory is there some kind of activation spreading kind of thing going on? What we found is that for people that currently own an automobile — so let's say, Rich, what kind of a car do you drive?

Rich: A Honda.

A Honda. Okay. So Rich currently drives a Honda, so if I asked Rich, "How likely are you to buy an automobile," what brands are most (*unintelligible*) for Rich? Okay, Honda. He's got it on his key chain. It's on the front of the steering wheel and all that kind of thing, so the car that should receive that sort of activation spreading is Honda for Rich. Somebody else might drive a—does anybody drive a Saab? Nobody. A Volvo? Okay, there's a Volvo. John's got the Volvo, and for John it's Volvo. We asked John, and he's going to get the activation spreading on Volvo. So how does that manifest? People that were asked the question, and this is going back and looking at repeat purchasing, in essence, so 39 percent of people who currently own an automobile repeat buy the brand that they currently get. That's just a general

market average. If they were asked this intention question, though, that repeat purchase goes up to 52 percent. So it's very consistent with this sort of basic notion of spreading activation.

What about for nonusers? What would you predict for nonusers? So what brands are going to be most successful? What subcategory numbers are most successful in the automobile category—?

Unidentified speaker: Market leaders.

Market leaders, okay. So you're looking at a large market share kind of thing, and that's exactly what we find, Elliott. So for nonusers large market share brands are bought by 36 percent of folks, and that goes up to 72 percent if they got asked this question. Again, this is one question asked in a panel once, and then we tracked purchasing over the next six months.

Unidentified speaker: Those are experiments?

No, sorry. Well, experiments in the sense—

Unidentified speaker: —(Unintelligible) survey response that you could get from the questions?

Correct. These are folks that were in a large national sample, and so what we do is basically — without getting into the nitty gritty details — these folks are the folks that joined the panel, okay? So these guys are in the panel already. They're asked the question, and these folks are not in the panel. They join the panel, and six months later we compare the purchases of both of these groups. They're matched on all sorts of things. We control for it in a zillion different ways.

If it sort of looks like this spreading activation, we start to think, "Well, maybe—is this a conscious thing?" Jim, in his original paper had talked about it as sort of an elaborative thing. I ask you how likely are you to volunteer, and you start thinking, "Well, it would be nice to volunteer." You sort of play it out in your mind, but the spreading activation kind of pattern looked like it might be less conscious. So without going into the sort of divided attention or process association kind of paradigm too much, most of you are probably pretty familiar with it. The idea is that every process in life is some combination of automatic and intentional processes, and we want to get a sense for what the weight on these two things is. And so, basically, I'll just give you the outcome.

Basically, what we find across two different settings — one is a volunteering setting and a purchase setting — we find that basically the automatic component is about three times that of the intentional. So asking this question seems to be firing something that's largely operating outside of conscious awareness. A second

piece of data along this, and I somehow missed the slide that described this study, but this is basically the hypothetical question paradigm. So in this one what we do is we ask people — this is the hypothetical question. “Strong evidence emerges from a study suggesting that cakes and pastries are not as bad for your health. They particularly may have some major health benefits. What would happen to your consumption of these items?” People say that they answered the question, and most people said, “Oh, I’d probably eat a little bit more cakes and pastries, etc.”

So then they do something else. About an hour later they finish the set of studies, they leave the first room and they walk to the room next door and they’re signing out and getting their participation credit. We say, “Oh, as an extra little thank-you, feel free to take a snack.” As they go out the door, we observe whether they pick up a fruit salad or a cake. Not surprisingly, those asked a hypothetical question versus the control group, the baseline cake choice was like 30 percent in the control group and it goes up to about 90 percent in the hypothetical question.

So then as they then leave that room, we take them into a final debriefing. They weren’t expecting this, of course, but we do a final debrief with them to see if they made any connection, etc. We normally don’t do this, but I really liked these sort of—sometimes these qualitative open-ended things are kind of fun to look at. “I can’t see how that could happen. No, I’m sure it didn’t affect me at all. Beats me. I mean, I wasn’t even thinking about that study when I picked up the cake. It doesn’t make sense. It can’t be true, right? I mean, the first study did not say that I should have cake. All it said is that cakes have become healthy, but cakes are not healthy. I mean, that could not have caused me to take it.” (*Laughter*) So you see the twisted and tortured feelings that these poor participants are going through as they’re confronted with the fact that they may have been influenced by this hypothetical question, and that people really don’t like to believe that these questions, which they see as truly innocuous, could possibly influence them.

So you see some of the affect sizes are quite robust and quite large. What is it about questions that are so special? I’m going to present a couple of studies that look at what are the aspects of the question that are important. The first one is this notion of, “Is it important to see yourself in the question?” So if I ask you a question about yourself versus a question about someone else, does that matter? Is that going to make a difference in terms of whether your behavior will ultimately change as a function of this?

So we ran the following study. How likely are you to floss your teeth in the coming week? How likely is a randomly chosen member of this class to floss his/her teeth in the coming week, and how likely are they to read for pleasure in the coming week? That’s just a control question, and here’s what you get: we see the basic effect here. The control. They report flossing four times. We ask them about flossing, themselves flossing and it goes up to six. We ask them about a randomly chosen member of the class, and it’s four.

By asking about themselves and their own behavior, we see this increase — again, consistent with the positive behavior and we see the increase in the behavior. They can imagine themselves flossing. It's more difficult for them to imagine a randomly chosen member of the class. Imagine one of your peers flossing. A, it's not quite as pleasant, and it's just more difficult to visualize, so that was sort of the logic of why we think that the notion of the self in the question is an important feature. We'll come back to this later.

How one frames the question matters a lot, and we've done a ton of studies on this particular domain. I'm just going to present, I think, one here. The idea was that certain things are easier to visualize, and one can imagine oneself engaging in a certain behavior, so we asked them about how likely they are to eat fatty food, how likely they are not to eat fatty food and how likely they are to avoid eating fatty food. Eating fatty food being a negative thing, which would be a decrease when we asked the question versus not, and an hour after we do this, they then are asked to do other unrelated tasks which is to do a taste test of one of two things. They can either do a taste test on these little rice cakes, or they can do a taste test on these little mini chocolate chip cookies.

Here is the data. So almost everybody in the control condition chooses the taste test on the mini chocolate chip cookies, not that shockingly, although interestingly, the little mini rice cakes are actually quite tasty nowadays. They've really improved on that technology. We asked them about eating fatty food. What happens? It decreases to 65 percent, which is consistent with the other data I've been showing you. This one was interesting.

So one of the things that we've often been asked, and which is why we ran the study, but what happens if you ask the reverse? Instead of saying, "Eating fatty food," what if you say, "What if you don't eat fatty food?" Well, there's a lot of research in cognitive psychology in particular that argues that these negations are spontaneously re-encoded as the positive, right? That's, in fact, exactly what we see here. So not eating fatty food doesn't activate a representation of you not eating fatty food. I'm not even sure what that representation would be, right? What it does is it activates the representation of you actually eating fatty food, and thus your behavior is guided by that.

The interesting one here was that avoiding eating fatty food does seem to activate a different representation for you. So if we asked the question, "How likely are you to avoid engaging in this negative behavior?" it seems to, again, this is just speculative because I don't have direct evidence of it, but it seems to activate a different set of mental representations. You imagine yourself walking away or doing something else — pulling out your chewing gum. I don't know what people do when they avoid eating fatty food. I'm not very good at it myself. So the way in which we frame the question does matter.

But just sort of back to this general theme of, “Well, why would this asking questions lead to such a big thing?” Well, the basic idea that I’ve believed since we started doing this research is that asking questions somehow slides below the level of our defenses. If you see an advertisement on television, you know that they’re trying to persuade you. We’ve perceived that through a certain lens. If we’re asked a question, we answer the question and move on. Our defensive mechanisms never come up, and so let me present a couple of studies sort of along this way.

What we do is we manipulate the degree to which people believe we’re attempting to persuade them through asking a question, and we do that by having these questions be sponsored. So we either have a low persuasive intent, which is just the intention question, or we have a moderate one, which is a sponsored question from an objective source. So I think that the data that I’m going to present — I think this is flossing. So the moderate one was the American Dental Association. “How likely are you to floss? The American Dental Association.” The high persuasive intent is, “How likely are you to floss? The American Manufacturers of Dental Products.” Okay, and people perceive that as intent to persuade.

Control condition six goes up to ten times, if you ask them how likely they are to floss. If it’s an objective source, you still see a significant increase. If it’s a self-interested source, not only do you not see the increase, but people are where you can sort of see, “Oh, yeah. I’ll show you! I’m not flossing at all this week!” You get a backlash to the perceived persuasive intent. Now, the story that I’ve been telling is very much like it’s a two-stage model. You have this sort of automatic response as I mentioned earlier, so this sort of firing that goes on outside of conscious awareness. And then you might actually censor it, if you believe that it’s an intent to persuade you, right?

So, basically, we ran the same study, but in addition, we had an impaired capacity condition — a typical kind of distractive or secondary task distraction. We see the same pattern that we saw before. The impaired capacity condition is identical in three of the four conditions, except in the condition where there’s a self-interested source. What we find there is if you just ask them and they’re under load, they don’t do the downward adjustment and you see the significant increase in the behavior.

Unidentified speaker: On the underload, is that when they’re asked the question—?

It’s when they’re asked the question, yes. These are over a week, so clearly—now, they’re able to recall the question, and so they’re equally able to report a week out that they were asked a question about flossing.

Unidentified speaker: And those sources too?

Yes, sorry, and the source as well. Both groups at very, very high levels are able to report that. In this particular one, because usually we do these with one question in a series of like ten or twelve questions — this particular one, because we had to sponsor it, it was more like an ad of sorts, so we had the one question with the sponsor and they were all at very, very high levels able to retrieve it.

I'm describing this stuff. Do these effects last? We've talked about some data, like for example, the car purchase stuff that would suggest that these effects are enduring. "Would they be observed for important behavior such as voting?" It's one thing about volunteering or buying a car or something like that, but in voting many of us believe that it's quite important.

So before I get to the voting data, I wanted to talk a little bit about something that one would believe is an important thing. This is with the data that I've been doing over the last year or so. Hypothetical questions are used as a matter of course in the jury selection process in the U.S., so we have a process in the U.S. called the voir dire process. Everybody that's been in a jury has experienced this. You arrive and either you're prescreened by mail prior to arrival, or you arrive at the courthouse and you're asked a series of questions before you're impaneled in a jury, right? Well, many of these questions are hypothetical questions of this nature. "The evidence in this trial may indicate that the defendant was a member of a gang. Hypothetically, would this influence your ability to be a fair and impartial juror?" Has anybody been asked a question like that as a part of this process? Okay, I mean, it's a pretty typical kind of thing. All right. If you personally weren't asked it, then you were probably sitting beside somebody that was and so you're exposed to these types of questions.

So the study that we ran, basically, was to—and obviously, we believed in advance based on the other work that we've been doing that this hypothetical question might actually change the juror's actual behavior. So people were either asked control questions during the voir dire process, or and this first study that I'll mention is sort of a—this is a lab study with undergraduates. I'll get to the sort of more real world sample in a moment.

So they either got just control questions, or they got these control questions plus this hypothetical question. The hypothetical question that they got was actually that gang membership one that I just read. Three days later they came to the lab and they acted as jurors. It was individually that they were acting as jurors in a murder case. They were presented with a series of items in a trial and had to determine the guilt of the party, and at the end of it they were asked to answer a series of questions, including what recommendation would you give to the judge in terms of sentencing and thing along those lines.

Additionally, some participants began the trial with the gang membership presented as fact. The first piece of evidence that they received was that this party was a member of a gang, so they saw and the defendant

admitted under cross-examination having been a member of The Kings, a powerful LA gang with known underworld connections.

So, essentially then we have these three cells. We've got a control condition with no information at all about gangs; we've got a fact condition with evidence introduced at the trial about their actual gang membership, and then we have the hypothetical. Asked during the voir dire about gang membership, this is three days prior, and this is during the actual trial at the time. There's the data.

The actual information about them being a member of a gang made essentially no difference in their recommendation about mean jail term. As to hypothetical during the voir dire process, it went up from 27 to 33. I don't know about you, but this frightens me. All right? This type of question is asked all the time. Okay. Now, one thing that you could say is, "Well, it's a student sample" and all this kind of thing.

Jon: I just want to make sure that I understand. This is what I'm really confused about. Why wouldn't that lead them to be more fair, and therefore, less punitive? Given everything else that you've done, I mean, "Were you going to buy a car? Yes, I'm going to buy a car. Yes, I'm going to be fair. Of course, I'm going to be fair." I mean, I guess unless you assume that, "Well, it's really fair to punish them more if they're a gang," it seems the reverse of what you predict.

Okay. I hear where you're coming here. First, I should say that while Jim Sherman's original thing suggested that it was self-erasing — you predicted it, and then you were consistent with it — we have some colleagues that are doing analysis right now across a whole series of these studies. We've done 50 to 100 of them as a group, and the correlation between stated intent and actual behavior is only about .05. So there's a very, very weak correlation between what you say you're going to do and what you actually do, so that's one response.

The other is that these hypotheticals—so remember I'm switching paradigms in a way. I'm asking a simple intention question. "How likely are you to do it?" And then the hypothetical where there's real content in the question, and so in this hypothetical paradigm it's slightly different than those simple intention questions, because there's the hypothetical content. It's sticking, okay? This hypothetical content is sticking in a way, and people are, if you believe by asking the hypothetical question that they're doing something more with the information than the fact — obviously, based on the data.

Unidentified speaker: So they're elaborating this? Is that what you mean?

The question, "Are they elaborating?" By asking a hypothetical question, is it drawing their attention to it and making it more salient than an actual presentation of it as a fact in a trial would be? In a trial one could

believe that the cross-examination maybe wasn't totally fair and biased, and that it was somewhat slanted, whereas the hypothetical was unbiased. Again, there are many explanations I think that could drive it.

Unidentified speaker: So it doesn't matter how you answer the question. It matters how the question is asked, right?

Correct. Again, across all of the studies how you answer the question is not the key driver. It's the fact that the question was asked.

Unidentified speaker: It's like the "do no eat fatty foods" effect.

Right, it is in a way. Exactly.

Unidentified speaker: The point is that you have to go through the process thinking about how difficult it would be to constrain your punitive (unintelligible).

Unidentified speaker: Well, I mean if you have this prior study, so if you would ask them, "Can you avoid bias on the basis of gang membership," you probably would have gotten that other result, no?

That's interesting. That's a good question, yes. I'll show you the next outcome study that we're going to attempt to debias, to stop this not using that approach but using a slightly different approach. Okay, so in this next one we wanted to address this issue of subjects. The student sample is not necessarily persuasive, and particularly if we're going to try and change people's minds in the legal community, they're not going to be very convinced by this. So David, God bless him, went to the Durham County Courthouse. The participants for this study were actual jurors sitting and waiting to be impaneled in a jury, okay? So they were about to be impaneled in a jury. There were three conditions — a control condition, one that got the hypothetical question and one that got a hypothetical question preceded by what we'd call a warning, and I'll show you the warning.

Before asking the questions and other data that I've got shows that it's critical to do this prior to asking the questions. If you do it after you ask them the question, then it doesn't matter. It doesn't do anything. If you do it prior to asking the questions — these questions have been submitted by the attorneys for the defense and the prosecution — then you should not use them to draw any conclusions about the case. The questions are designing only to measure your general attitudes, so we give them that up front.

Then we do the exact same thing as before — we put them through the voir dire process, we ask them these questions and here's the data. This is the same effect, and this is, again, with real jurors. In terms of the

recommended jail time, you can see actually getting an even bigger effect and a bigger increase here in terms of recommended jail time by the jurors, but if we give the warning in advance, this is a non-significant increase. So warning them in advance seems to change the way that they process the information in a relatively effective way.

Patty: Now, that happens directly before that particular question, or what if that was question 15 and you got the warning at the beginning of the whole series?

The warning came at the beginning. They got the control questions, and then this one, Patty. Although, there were only, I think, two controls — two control questions prior. I mean, as you lengthen it out, it's possible that the warning maybe would become less effective.

Unidentified speaker: About 50 years ago we ran some jury—(Garbled) With bad results with telling the jurors to ignore something.

Yes. Well, if you heard it and then you tell them, it doesn't do any good. I mean we've found this in other studies and not in this particular one. So what about evidence directly in voting domains? Okay, so I'll present some stuff that I've done as well as some that others have done. So Tony Greenwell ran a very nice study a number of years back in a voting domain where basically this was the study. This was an Ohio State study with, I guess, it must be an honors class or something like that. You guys have an honors thesis thing where the kids went out and ran the study. So there were 13 kids in the class. They went out and they were the administrators of the study. They contacted in the voting one here, they contacted folks that were Ohio State undergrads that were registered to vote.

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