

Author(s): Erbring, Lutz and Peter Clarke
Title: NES '80 Media Segment
Date: August 16, 1979
Dataset(s): None

Abstract

Erbring and Clarke suggest and justify specific question wordings for three sets of media-related items in the 1980 NES Survey. First, the authors address questions that measure frequency of media use and exposure and attention to various media sources. Specifically, they suggest adding questions to the survey to measure news magazine readership and TV reliance. Second, Erbring and Clarke discuss the sequence of items that measure beliefs about the "most important problem" the President will have to face. The authors argue that nontraditional wording and follow-up probes should be incorporated into the survey questions in order to better gauge public opinion. In addition, the authors argue that multiple responses should be allowed for the most important problem question. Finally, the paper addresses possible survey questions concerning presidential candidates and their campaigns. The authors suggest adding follow-up questions to probe agreement/disagreement among respondents' interpersonal communication partners.

MEMO
TO: NES Steering Committee
FROM: Lutz Erbring
SUBJECT:

NES 80 Media Segment

The media-related items for the '80 questionnaires as proposed by those of us who have been involved in discussions on this subject in recent months (Peter Clarke, Steve Chaffee, Art Miller, Lutz Erbring) comprise three main sets:

- 1) Frequency of Use/Exposure and Attention
- 2) Most Important Problem Sequence
- 3) Candidate Sequence.

We have tried to coordinate our proposals by phone as much as possible, and I am collating the fruits of these labors here, for consideration during the next set of meetings. I am adding some comments that may not be included in the attached materials since they reflect the results of informal conversations on some of the topics.

1) Frequency of Use/Exposure and Attention

These items are specified and explained in Peter Clark's memo (pp. 1-2), separately for Television and Newspapers, in essentially parallel form for the two media (only additional suggestion: drop the "almost" in the newspaper question "...just the headline ... some of the article ... all of it?").

In addition, two items should be reinstated because there appears to be enough continuing interest among political communication scholars in their continued availability as part of the NES time series and for various cross-sectional inquiries as well: News magazine readership and TV reliance. Both of these are discussed in Steve Chaffee's letter of July 16, including the suggestion to focus the former item explicitly on Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and provide a closed-ended format (perhaps with an "Other" code), i.e.

"Do you regularly read a weekly news magazine such as Time, Newsweek, or U.S. News and World Report? (IF YES) Which?"

Response Codes: TIME NEWSWEEK USNEWS OTHER NONE

The TV reliance item is the standard question as asked in previous studies, i.e.

"Which do you rely on most for news about politics and current events--newspapers or television?"

Response Codes: NEWSPAPERS BOTH EQUALLY TELEVISION DK

2) Most Important Problem Sequence

This sequence is one of the two main vehicles for a detailed mapping of political communication habits, sources, flows, and effects. (the other being the candidate sequence). There is no redundancy between the two sequences since the first deals with agenda-setting/issue salience and the second with campaign dynamics/candidate perceptions.

The most important problem is linked to the themes of personal impact, candidates/campaign, TV message discrimination/recall, Newspaper message discrimination/recall and interpersonal communication. Two additional considerations have emerged in recent conversations and are related to the definition/refinement of these items: they concern the wording of the most important problem question, and the scope of certain follow-up probes. The basis for discussion is the sequence as specified in Peter Clarke's memo (pp.4-13).

- a) There were some concerns about allowing the "most important problem" question to depart from the standard wording as used in previous studies and also in other, commercial polls (important for time series comparability). On the other hand, there are two reasons for adopting the wording as suggested in Peter Clarke's memo, i.e.

"What is the single most important problem that the person who will become president should do something about?"

rather than

"... facing this country?"

The latter version (which is used by Gallup and others) not only misses the specific tie with campaign and election salience, it also invites more readily a parrot response which the respondent may have learned as the "correct" answer (i.e., the most important problem facing the country is what political leaders or authorities have publicly defined as "the most important problem facing the country", in exactl these words). While it is not clear whether the "... should do something about" phrase is sufficient to overcome such verbal ritualism, this version definitely seems worth trying (by the same token, the usual m.i.p. question asked by the polls should perhaps be rephrased to "... the most important problem the government should do something about" as opposed to the implied meaning of the standard format which is more like "... the most important problem the government is talking about"). Unfortunately none of us had thought of this prior to the pilot survey.

- b) The concerns involving follow-up probes address two specific points. One has to do with the absence of a probe for

"Are there any other important problems that ... should do something about?"

For one thing, the restriction to "the" (single) most important problem increases the verbal ritual/echo probability discussed in the preceding paragraph; for another, it reflects an imbalance in the sequence which concentrates probing on areas which both a priori and in terms of pilot results appear to be low-yield, such as "What do you think the person who will become president should do about this problem?" (typical answers "Solve it" or "Do more"; cf. comments in Peter Clark's memo) or "Are there any other ideas for how the person who will become president should deal with the problem?" (likewise) or similarly, CODE UP TO FIVE MENTIONS for "How does this problem affect you (and your family)?" (personally, I think we'll be lucky to get ONE usable mention, perhaps an occasional two). Finally, the follow-up from the pilot, on interpersonal communication,

"Do you think the people you talked with feel the same way about this problem or do some of them feel differently about it?"

might deserve another look for possible retention (same for candidate sequence). Anyone studying the dynamics of informal political communication with a view to the selective interaction problem would need this item, both in its own right and as a possible base of comparison for the more partisan type of personal communication about candidates (see below). Even if it turns out that people mostly find themselves in agreement on the problem (which is a different matter when they mention "valence" issues than "position" issues) this information would be needed for comparison purposes across issues, between issues and candidates, and (rather importantly in view of the study design) over the course of the campaign.

3) Candidate Sequence

The candidate sequence, in addition to measuring visibility in terms of unaided recall (as opposed to name recognition), is linked to TV message discrimination/recall, Newspaper message discrimination/recall, and interpersonal communication. The items are again contained in Peter Clarke's memo (pp.14-17).

Only additional considerations that have been discussed again involve follow-up probes concerning agreement/disagreement with conversation partner (essential to study dynamics of personal communication/selectivity over course of campaign); and finally, whether "anything else" probes after TV/Newspaper message recall should focus on additional messages (likely with present wording) or other candidates.

Department of
COMMUNICATION

The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109

August 16, 1979

Lutz

The attached questionnaire draft reflects our conversations through last night and updates the memorandum used at the last planning meeting.

There are some changes suggested since my last discussion with Warren about a couple items; I've given him a copy.

(You may get another version of the newspaper intensity item from Steve--I haven't been able to talk this over with him.)

If you need to reach me, call the farm (616) 536-2139.

Cheers,



Here are some notes to help keep us from overlooking any of the habitual media use items. They appear on pp. 33-35 of the R & D codebook. I've added an intensity item for newspapers.

Television.

How often do you watch the early evening national news on TV--every evening, 3 or 4 times a week, once or twice a week, or less often?

Response alternatives

And how about the late evening news on TV--do you watch it every night, 3 or 4 times a week, once or twice a week, or less often?

Response alternatives

When you watch the news on TV, do you pay a great deal of attention to news about government and politics, do you pay some attention, or don't you pay much attention to news about government and politics?

Response alternatives

Note: This drops the phrase "national news" from the R & D item. We are already asking about exposure to the network news shows, so there isn't any need to distinguish national from local. Including the phrase risks including all sorts of news and features that took place in other parts of the country than where each respondent lives.

Thinking about when you watch the news on TV, are you usually doing other things while the news is on, or do you stop doing other things to watch the news?

Response alternatives

Newspapers.

Do you read a daily newspaper regularly? Which paper or papers do you read?

Standard coding

In general, when you read the newspapers, do you pay a great deal of attention to news about government and politics, do you pay some attention, or don't you pay much attention to news about government and politics?

Response alternatives; parallel change to TV item

When you see something about government and politics, do you usually read just the headline, read some of the article, or do you usually read ~~almost~~ all of it?

Response alternatives

Note: In this new intensity item, response categories have been drawn from standard readership survey distinctions; we can expect the major explanatory variance to lie between reading some and all. The headline alternative is needed to help reduce over reporting.

Talking with others.

I've confined my attention to the focused items used with most important problem and candidates. I assume items on pp. 22-27 are products of others' research agendas; there are problems with them, but I'll stay out of that swamp.

The following pages deal with most important problem and candidates, incorporating revisions you, Warren and I have thought about since the Hilton meeting in July.

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

1 IMP PROB

We'd like you to think about
important problems facing the
country.

The series starts with explicit focus on
presidential politics, whether during
primary or general election phases.

What is the single most important
problem that the person who will
become president should ~~do~~
~~something about?~~ *try to solve?*

NES problem codes work fine.

✓

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

2 SAL INFO

Would you say that you (or your family) are affected personally by this problem?

IF YES: How does this problem affect you (and your family)?

CODE UP TO FIVE MENTIONS

Codes need to be expanded somewhat to allow for responses that may be offered if non-economic issues come into the agenda during 1980. Greater distinctions in the economic codes can also be attained with little difficulty. Each code is applied on a yes/no basis to note mentions of symbols falling into each category.

- 01: Mentions of income. Cost of living, inflation, moneywise, financially, money not go as far.
- 02: Mentions of property or family assets. Car, house value, savings or other tangibles.
- 03: Mentions of job or employment opportunity.
- 04: Outgo to government. Taxes, etc.
- 05: Outgo for living expenses and non-governmental costs.
- 06: General economic effect--not specified in terms of income, tangibles, job or outgo categories.
- 07: Mentions of health.
- 08: Mentions of well-being or safety.
- 09: Mentions of availability of goods or services, gas, an education, etc.
- 10: Mentions of time or free time.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

11: General non-economic mentions--not specified in terms of health, well-being, availability of goods/services, or time. (Vague references to "life style" go here.)

11: Other

Note. Codes 06 and 11 are exceptions to our proposed rule against hierarchies; they are invoked when related codes cannot be used.

Warren may have second thoughts about ^{the next} series. He, Maria, Jeannie and I developed it to disentangle the confusions in R & D between C6/D6 and C7/D7, and to link problems to the candidates (absolutely essential, I think).

Version 1 is how it emerged from drafting with Warren. Version 2 would collect the most critical information, if we need to shorten the interview.

(Note: Wording will certainly change for the general election period.)

VERSION 1

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

3 IDEAS/
CAND

Have any of the people running
for president talked about ideas
or proposals for doing something
about this problem?

IF YES: Which of the candidates
talked about ideas or proposals?

CODE ALL MENTIONS

What do you think the person who
will become president should do
about this problem?

Are any of the people running for
president in favor of this idea?

IF YES: Which ones?

Are any of the people running for
president opposed to this idea?

IF YES: Which ones?

Are there any other ideas or
proposals for how the person who
will become president should
deal with the problem? Any ideas
that (X) has/have talked about--
or any other people have talked
about?

IF YES: What are those ideas
or proposals?

Qualitative comparisons between coding
schemes for C6/D6 and C7/D7 are difficult
to make. The most popular replies in both
refer to price controls and guidelines, a
natural answer in light of MIPs we unearthed.
The second most popular code for C7/D7 is
a vague, insubstantial mandate that "the
government should do more" without any
supporting instructions. By contrast, the
second most popular code for C6/D6 is
"decrease federal spending" or "put a limit
on the budget," which sounds a bit more
sophisticated than just doing more.

Can we extract the best from both sets of
codes through merger?

A combined set should be used for both IDEAS
items.

VERSION 2

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

3 IDEAS/
CAND

Have any of the people running for president talked about ideas or proposals for doing something about this problem?

IF YES: Which of the candidates talked about ideas or proposals?

CODE ALL MENTIONS

What do you think the person who will become president should do about this problem?

~~Are any of the people running for president in favor of this idea?~~

~~IF YES: Which ones?~~

~~Are any of the people running for president opposed to this idea?~~

~~IF YES: Which ones?~~

Are there any other ideas or proposals for how the person who will become president should deal with the problem? Any ideas that candidates or any other people have talked about?

IF YES: What are those ideas or proposals?

Qualitative comparisons between coding schemes for C6/D6 and C7/D7 are difficult to make. The most popular replies in both refer to price controls and guidelines, a natural answer in light of MIPs we unearthed. The second most popular code for C7/D7 is a vague, insubstantial mandate that "the government should do more" without any supporting instructions. By contrast, the second most popular code for C6/D6 is "decrease federal spending" or "put a limit on the budget," which sounds a bit more sophisticated than just doing more.

Can we extract the best from both sets of codes through merger?

A combined set should be used for both IDEAS items.

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

4 TV SYMBOLS

During the last week or two, have you seen anything on television about this problem?

IF YES: Of the things you saw which one comes to mind first?

Did you see anything else on television about this problem?

IF YES: What was that?

These revised items more closely resemble earlier CPS questions that have proven analytic power. We start by establishing the medium that interests us (the great bulk of campaign communication is seen on television and in newspapers) and a time period to provide respondents a frame within which they can answer, a frame they badly need according to our reading of R & D questionnaires.

The width of time actually used will depend on whether cross-sectional interviews are bunched after key primaries or spread more evenly.

In addition, our coding scheme abandons an attempt to tally number of messages. We have been able to construct such an estimate in earlier studies that allowed more interview time for probes and in which it was feasible to train interviewers intensively for this task in the questionnaire. Survey conditions in 1980 do not permit these elaborations; our coding shifts from messages to discrete types of symbols people have seen or heard-- reported in up to three tiers of responding.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

We should code as many mentions as the coding scheme accommodates.

- 01: Mentions of problem causes.
- 02: Mentions of problem cures.
- 03: Mentions of groups affected by problem-- other than "self" or "family".
- 04: Mentions of other problems, linked to MIP.
- 05: Mentions of other problems, but not specifically linked to MIP by respondent.
- 06: Mentions of political/governmental actors.
- 07: Mentions of private actors.
- 08: Repeat of problem with no substantive elaboration.
- 09: Repeat of problem with either positive or negative orientation. Things are getting better/worse.
- 10: Other.

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

5 NSP SYMBOLS

During the last week or two,
have you read anything in
newspapers about this problem?

IF YES: Of the things you read,
which one comes to mind first?

Did you read anything else in
newspapers about this problem?

IF YES: What was that?

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

6 DISCUSS

During the last week or two, have
you talked to other people about
this problem?

We code as many role relationships
(spouse, friends and neighbors, etc.)
as are mentioned.

IF YES: Who are these people?
I mean, what is their connection
to you?

R GETS BOOKLET

IF NO: Have you been present when
other people you know have talked
about this problem?

Who are these people? I mean,
what is their connection to
you?

R GETS BOOKLET

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

1 CAND

Who are the people running for
president this year? Any others?

CHECK ALL MENTIONS

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

2 TVCAND.

I'd like to ask about the candidates
and their campaigns for president.

Each response tier is coded for presence
or absence of content and candidates.

During the last week or two, have
you seen anything on television
about the candidates or their
campaigns?

Content codes are:

IF YES: Of the things you saw,
which one comes to mind first?

01: Personal characteristics

02: A public issue, or position on issue

(IF R DOES NOT VOLUNTEER
CANDIDATE NAME): Which
candidate was that about?

03: Performance on an issue

04: Popularity, prospects for running, or
likelihood of victory

Did you see anything else on
television about the candidates
or their campaigns during the
last week or two?

05: Any other campaign ingredient--
strategy, event, etc., including use
of media

IF YES: What was that?

06: Repetition of seeing candidate or
campaign in media--not a reference to
planned use of media or other strategy

(IF NEEDED): Which candidate
was that about?

07: A supporting group or individual
endorsement

08: Reference to political party

09: Other

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

3 NSPCAND

During the last week or two, have you read anything in newspapers about the candidates or their campaigns?

IF YES: Of the things you read, which one comes to mind first?

(IF R DOES NOT VOLUNTEER CANDIDATE NAME): Which candidate was that about?

Did you read anything else in newspapers about the candidates or their campaigns during the last week or two?

IF YES: What was that?

(IF NEEDED): Which candidate was that about?

Sequence
number &
item label

Item wording

Comments and coding

4 DISCUSS
CAND

During the last week or two, have
you talked to other people about
the candidates or their campaigns?

Again, code for role relationships.

IF YES: Who are these people?
I mean, what is their connection
to you?

R GETS BOOKLET

IF NO: Have you been present when
other people you know have talked
about the candidates or their campaigns?

Who are these people? I mean,
what is their connection to
you?

R GETS BOOKLET