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Title: 1987 Pilot Study "Force Choice" Party Identification Question Experiment

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Dataset(s): 1987 Pilot Study

Abstract

This paper compares the traditional party identification question to a forced-choice version of that item. Niemi and Weisberg find that most people give the same answers to both question formats. However, the authors also find that if the "independent" category is not suggested to respondents, fewer people will say they are independents. This experimental wording depresses the proportion of independents by forcing more people to designate a party identification -- the percentage of respondents indicating a partisanship increases by 14 percent -- and allowing respondents to reject all standard partisanship categories by answering "neither" to the party identification question. Finally, the authors compare the associations between the party identification questions and evaluations of Reagan. They find that Republican and Democratic identifiers behave fairly similarly across the two question types, but "independents" evaluate Reagan differently depending on both the question wording used and the manner in which "leaners" are coded.

September 25, 1987

REPORT TO NES Board of Overseers

FROM: Dick Niemi & Herb Weisberg

SUBJECT: 1987 Pilot Study "Force Choice" Party Identification
Question Experiment

We requested using a "forced choice" version of the party identification question in the 1987 pilot study: "Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself a Republican or a Democrat?" The traditional version was also asked, allowing a comparison of the two question wordings.

The purpose of this experiment was to allow us to analyze more carefully what the traditional party identification question has been measuring, and NOT to develop a new wording for use in the election studies (since changing the traditional wording at this point would throw off many time series studies without producing any great gain). As a result, this report has no action paragraph; it summarizes some of the results for the benefit of the Board. The experiment is useful for researchers who are exploring the nature of party identification in these times when it is being questioned so much, especially since this experiment duplicates the SRC sampling frame and uses SRC interviewers, thus fully controlling "house effects," which interfere with cross-organizational studies of different wordings. We expect to combine these results with some other experiments into a manuscript we will submit for journal publication.

There is already a small literature on this subject. In a general sense, of course, any experiment such as this fits into the literature on question wording effects, and especially the effect of including a neutral alternative. But more specifically, there has been some attention to the effect of the "independent" option in the party identification question. Most relevant is a forthcoming article in Public Opinion Quarterly by Tom Rice reporting on a experiment in Vermont using the forced choice option one year and the traditional wording the following year on an independent sample. The paper is interesting, but the study design is flawed since different people were asked the two questions and since the partisan distribution of the population might have changed between the studies. The pilot study experiment was designed to correct these flaws.

The main question we are describing is "v7--forced choice party" in the Pilot Study Codebook (v2180). The marginals for that variable are:

Freq	Code	Category
79	1	Republican
20	3	Independent (volunteered)
88	5	Democrat
1	6	Other party (Libertarian, Socialist, etc.)
30	7	Other volunteered response
1	8	Don't know
3	9	Not ascertained
235	0	Inappropriate (question asked only on one form)

Other variables indicate the answers of the 30 coded "other volunteered response". Five of these people indicated they were Independents (v6006); another 5 indicated they were split ticket voters (v6007). The remaining 20 were then asked "How do you think of yourself politically?" V6009 summarizes their responses:

Freq	Code	Category
10	1	Moderate, middle of the road
2	2	Democrat
3	3	Democrat, but not a strong party supporter
0	4	Republican
0	5	Republican, but not a strong party supporter
4	7	Apolitical (no interest in politics, no time to concern self about politics)
1	97	Other (not specified in codebook)

We would begin an analysis of these data by suggesting a slightly different coding of responses on the root question (v2180):

Freq	Code	Category	(old codes)
79	1	Republican	1
20	3	Independent	3
88	5	Democrat	5
32	7	Neither	6,7,8
3	9	Not ascertained	9
235	0	Inappropriate	0

In this coding scheme, the "neither" category includes all respondents who answered the question, refused to use the offered categories (Republican, Democrat), and did not volunteer the response Independent.

The table below compares the percentages answering Republican, Independent, and Democrat on the traditional party ID question with those from the forced choice version, with results shown only for form A respondents who were asked both questions:

Traditional	Category	Forced choice
31%	Republican	37%
36	Independent	9
33	Democrat	41
	Neither	14
100%	Total	101%

There are many fewer Independent responses when that alternative is not suggested to the respondents. Logically speaking, not offering "independent" could force more people to indicate a party response or could result in many respondents rejecting all of the standard categories (neither). In fact, both of these possibilities occur. The proportion of people indicating a partisanship goes up by 14%, from 64% on the traditional question to 78% on the forced choice; another 14% give "neither" responses. Note that the two forms do yield similar conclusions as to which party is in the majority: the Democratic lead in partisanship

over the Republicans is clear on both forms, though increased by one percentage point on the forced choice version over the traditional question wording.

The table below shows the cross-tabulation of the traditional party identification question with the fourfold classification for people who were asked both questions:

Trad Party ID	Forced Choice Party ID				Total
	Rep	Ind	Dem	Neither	
Strong Rep	20	0	0	0	20
Weak Rep	42	1	2	1	46
Lean Rep	14	4	0	6	24
Pure Indep	1	10	2	13	26
Lean Dem	1	4	14	9	28
Weak Dem	1	0	41	1	43
Strong Dem	0	0	29	0	29
Total	79	19	88	30	216

Sixty-nine percent of the respondents gave the same answers to both. As would be expected, the differences mainly involve independents, many of whom respond "Independent" on the first part of the traditional question but do not think of that response when it is not offered them on the forced choice version.

A final concern is how these two measures relate to dependent variables of interest. The pilot study included a question measuring approval of Reagan's job performance. The version of this question with strongly approve/approve/disapprove/strongly disapprove responses (v2152) will be used here as the validating dependent variable. The table below shows the attitude toward President Reagan's performance in office by partisanship for the half-sample that were asked both questions. (The table also shows two different ways of handling leaners on the traditional question and two different ways of handling neithers on the forced choice question.)

Traditional leaners as independents				Traditional leaners as partisans		
Rep	Ind	Dem		Rep	Ind	Dem
42%	20%	6%	Strongly Approve	36%	40%	5%
35	32	19	Weakly Approve	43	20	19
12	13	17	Weakly Disapprove	11	16	17
11	35	58	Strongly Disapprove	11	24	59
100%	100	100%		100%	100%	101%
69	75	65	number of cases	96	25	87
	.42		Somer's d		.51	

Forced choice volunteered Indep only				Forced choice Indep & neither combined		
Rep	Ind	Dem		Rep	Ind	Dem
40%	33%	4%	Strongly Approve	40%	26%	4%
39	22	20	Weakly Approve	39	24	20
12	11	20	Weakly Disapprove	12	9	20
9	33	56	Strongly Disapprove	9	41	56
100%	99%	100%		100%	100%	100%
77	18	84	number of cases	84	28	46
	.56		Somer's d		.47	

The results for Republicans are fairly similar across all possibilities, as are the results for Democrats. The differences largely involve the intermediate category. The highest correlation with Reagan job approval ratings is for the forced choice version using only volunteered independents as the middle category; the volunteered independents, though few in number, split relatively evenly between approving and disapproving of the president, much as one might expect of a set of pure independents. They are reasonably decisive in their feelings, though as one would expect, fewer of them than of partisans strongly approve or disapprove of the president. The lowest correlation with Reagan job approval ratings is for the traditional question with leaners coded as independents; these independents are, if anything, less decisive about their attitudes toward Reagan, which is surprising since this group includes leaners--who are sometimes thought of as disguised partisans. We plan to analyze these data further in coming weeks to better understand some of these differences.

In summary, this experiment shows that some respondents would choose the independent category even if that alternative was not offered to them, but many people we usually regard as independents would not think of that category by themselves. A comparison between these two groups may tell us more about the meaning of independence and the growth in independence.