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Title: Results of Vote Validation Experiment

Date: February 23, 1990

Dataset(s): 1989 Pilot Study

Abstract

Abelson finds that the 1989 Pilot Study experimental item measuring electoral participation failed to reduce over report of voting turnout. Abelson also presents statistical evidence to indicate that presidential voting turnout levels are initially more readily exaggerated than congressional voting. As time passes, however, this trend reverses.

Message: 5725044, 31 lines

Posted: 1:25pm EST, Fri Feb 23/90, imported: 4:17pm EST, Fri Feb 23/90

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Sorry to be late with my report. The results, however, are so simple that if copies are made of this message for circulation at the meeting, the reading time is 60 seconds.

The manipulation of question wording failed to reduce overreport of voting turnout. The experimental version was, "...we often find that a lot of people missed out on voting because]etc.(. How about you --did you miss out on voting?" The control version was the standard question, which starts with the same preamble, but ends with, "..did you vote?" The percentages of nonvoters who claimed to have voted were 30.8% for the experimental wording, and 29.8% for the control wording. This failure of a wording manipulation is consistent with the failure on the 1987 Pilot Study of a prior question ("Did you vote in any of the last four elections?") to diminish overreporting. In distinction from other findings in the memory literature such as memory for doctor visits, where accuracy can be improved by question manipulations, the suggestion is that voting is a uniquely dated event difficult to confuse with other events, and what misreporting occurs is primarily a matter of deliberate overstatement rather than blurring of memory.

One subsidiary finding is worthy of mention. In the 1987 Pilot compared to the 1986 Post Questionnaire, reported voting among nonvoters increased over time from 16.3% to 39.8%. There is also an increase manifest in the 1989 Pilot compared to the 1988 Post, but a much smaller one, from 26.5% to 29.9%.

The statistical interaction is only marginally significant, but if the figures are all reliable, it says that Presidential voting is more readily exaggerated in the first place than Congressional voting, but that this difference reverses with greater time delay. Presumably Presidential voting is intrinsically more memorable than Congressional voting -- but such an analysis appeals to blurredness of memory on top of mere social desirability, and thus is not completely consistent with our account of the failure of wording manipulations. So a puzzle remains.