

Measuring Attitudes

Measurement and Theory of Democratic Attitudes

Recap: Zaller's RAS-Model

- ▶ Real People might generate attitudes on the fly
- ▶ Based on political information they receive from elites (politicians, media, ...)
- ▶ Their survey response is based on a process averaging over (conflicting) 'considerations' in their minds
 - ▶ Receive
 - ▶ Accept
 - ▶ Sample

A Theory of the Survey Response

- ▶ An interview is like a conversation between respondent & interviewer
- ▶ Conventions apply
 - ▶ Don't be rude, don't offend
 - ▶ Don't talk nonsense
 - ▶ Don't just stop
- ▶ *But* ...
 - ▶ Respondents will not 'optimise' – no trial or police interview
 - ▶ Will make a 'reasonable' effort to give useful answer ...
 - ▶ ... as part of playing their role → 'satisficing'
 - ▶ More on this later

How can we measure attitudes

1. *Asking questions*
2. (Non-verbal) behavioural reactions to references to object
3. Actual Behaviour related to object
4. Look at social networks (friends, family)
5. Let make people judgements on object and look for bias
6. Physiological responses

What can we measure?

Direction/Evaluation favourable/unfavourable

Strength more important, certain, accessible, central

Base knowledge/cognition vs emotions/feelings

(Function/Nature utilitarian, value-expressive, social-adjustive)

One- vs. multiple-item measures

- ▶ One: short, sweet, and problematic
- ▶ Multiple Items → better
 - Magnitude Scaling* the next big thing: (since 30 years ago)
 - Guttman Scaling* 'ladder' of more and more extreme statements
 - Thurstone Scaling* judges & tick-boxes
 - Likert Scaling* rating scales and correlations

Indirect Measures

- ▶ Based on behaviour:
 - ▶ Lost letters (aggregate)
 - ▶ Behavioural indices (requiring observation)
- ▶ Based on judgemental bias
 - Error Choice Technique** what do people's best guesses reveal?
 - Evaluative Priming** spontaneously activated attitudes will affect the speed of your judgement
 - Implicit Association Test** four groups of terms; patterns of reaction speed Homework: check it out at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>
- ▶ Physiological Measures of attitudes
 - Facial Electromyography** people may frown even if you can't see it
 - Event-related Brain Potentials** people's brains light up if an object does not fit a categorisation

What is this all about?

- ▶ Most of the time, we rely on attitude questions
- ▶ Conventional wisdom helps us to avoid obvious problems
- ▶ Applying modern theories of the survey response might help even more

What can we expect from respondents?

- ▶ Answering survey questions requires four steps
 1. Interpret the question & deduce its intent
 2. Search memory for relevant information
 3. Integrate information into single judgment
 4. Map judgement to response by selecting alternative
- ▶ Most respondents have no incentive to provide *optimal answers*

Weak Satisficing Respondents rush through all four steps and pick first answer that seems to fit

Strong Satisficing Respondents skip steps 2+3 completely and take cues to find easiest answer – no relation to psychological state

- ▶ Design surveys/instruments so that satisficing is discouraged

Open vs closed questions

- ▶ Open questions more interesting, but much more demanding
- ▶ Often: DK
- ▶ Closed questions need exhaustive and non-overlapping answers
- ▶ Include some open questions where (deemed) possible

How many/which points for rating scales?

- ▶ Requirements of valid measurement
 - ▶ Entire continuum
 - ▶ Ordinal in appearance
 - ▶ Respondents must have precise and stable understanding of points
 - ▶ Most/all respondents must agree on interpretation
- ▶ *If* individual make fine distinctions, they need more points → five/seven points
- ▶ On balance, mid-points should be offered
- ▶ End-points should be labelled
- ▶ Much better using rating scales that tap into evaluative dimension directly than agree/disagree, true/false statements etc.

Primacy vs recency effects

- ▶ Depending on mode and other factors, both the first and the last answer can be particularly popular
- ▶ In part, due to (weak) satisficing behaviour
- ▶ Random sorting of options not a good idea
- ▶ Counterbalancing might help a bit
- ▶ Best to reduce satisficing by motivating respondents

No opinion (DK)

- ▶ If people have no opinion or knowledge, they might answer randomly (why?)
- ▶ DK filters offer people option to volunteer 'no opinion', but might encourage satisficing
- ▶ Why do people choose DK?
 1. They are too lazy/tired to really think about the question
 2. They are ambivalent
 3. They shy away from giving an undesirable answer
 4. They honestly have no opinion
- ▶ Better not include DK

Social desirability bias

- ▶ Social costs of giving (presumably) undesirable answer
- ▶ Anonymity/self-administered questionnaires
- ▶ Randomisation
 - ▶ Randomised Response Technique
 - ▶ Item Count Technique
- ▶ Play down the issue of desirability ('many people regularly beat up their partners')
- ▶ Offer multiple response options for the undesirable behaviour

Recall Error

- ▶ Not really relevant for us
- ▶ Unless we're inquiring about behaviours in the past

Question order is important

- ▶ Relevant stuff first, because it might sound interesting (motivation), and more people will answer
- ▶ Boring stuff (demographics) comes last
- ▶ Context effects are often unpredictable, but they are usually localised
- ▶ Grouping related items together is
 - ▶ Natural (Motivation)
 - ▶ Cheaper (in terms of cognitive effort)
 - ▶ Might lead to more nuanced/well-founded answers

Summary

- ▶ Respondents are having a conversation with us
- ▶ They are often willing to help us . . .
- ▶ but will not rack their brains for no apparent reasons . . .
- ▶ So
 - ▶ Keep them motivated
 - ▶ Avoid unnecessary cognitive costs
 - ▶ Reduce potential for mistakes/misunderstandings
 - ▶ Do not offer them an easy way out

Class Questions

Why exactly is this questionnaire rubbish?

- ▶ Discuss the problems of this questionnaire with your fellow students (in teams of three students)
- ▶ Think about ...
 - ▶ Problems with individual questions
 - ▶ Problems with the questionnaire's global structure
 - ▶ Any relations between these problems and the model of the survey response
- ▶ Try to improve at least three of the questions

Source: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/jpiliavi/357/neuman.pdf>