

RESEARCH NOTE

Can Overreporting in Surveys be Reduced? Evidence from Israel's Municipal Elections

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Studies over the last 50 years have consistently shown that survey respondents over-report their participation in American national elections (Abelson, Loftus & Greenwald, 1992; Clausen, 1968; Parry & Crossley, 1950; Presser, Traugott & Traugott, 1990; Silver, Anderson & Abramson, 1986; Traugott & Katosh, 1979). Similar results were reported in Britain (Swaddle & Heath, 1989), Sweden (Granberg & Holmberg, 1991), New Zealand (Karp & Banducci, 1999), and Norway (Waldahl & Aardal, 2000). Overreporting is a widespread democratic phenomenon. For example, ANES data reveal that between 13% and 41% of nonvoters report that they have voted in national elections when in fact they have not (Belli, Traugott, & Beckmann, 2001). Karp and Brockington find that overreporting among nonvoters ranges from 18.7% in Swedish regional elections to 26.2% in national elections. In Britain, the national numbers are similar, somewhat lower than in Norway (35%), U.S. presidential elections (40.1%), and in New Zealand (42.4%) (Karp & Brockington, 2005).

Why do people overreport their participation in elections? Two plausible explanations have been offered. The first one considers overreporting to be the result of forgetfulness. It is possible that respondents inaccurately report voting when they did not because they may remember their past in more socially desirable ways (Abelson, Loftus, & Greenwald, 1992). In other words, respondents fail to report their latest voting activity accurately because they confuse it with a former voting activity or with their original intention to vote. They project the older episode onto the more recent one, leading to confusion or failure of memory (Belli, Traugott, Young, & McGonagle, 1999). In line with this explanation, studies have shown that as the elapsed time from Election Day increases, so does the number of overreporters (Belli et al., 1999; Stocké, 2007).

A second explanation holds that respondents feel compelled to provide socially desirable responses in order to maintain a positive self-image (Paulhus, 1984; Paulhus & Reid, 1991; Silver, Anderson & Abramson, 1986; Traugott & Katosh, 1979). In other words, unlike memory failure, overreporters are fully aware that they did not vote, but to avoid embarrassment they intentionally state that they did (Belli, Moore, & VanHoewyk, 2006; Presser, 1990).

Given these explanations, scholars have tried to reduce overreporting by modifying question wording to address memory failure and dampen the impact of social desirability. Unfortunately, these attempts, such as asking respondents to report earlier voting behavior (Presser, 1990), assuring respondents' anonymity (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2003) or providing them with several reasons that cause people not to vote, such as sickness, lack of time or failure to register (Belli et al., 2001; Belli, Traugott, & Rosenstone, 1994), did not reduce the number of overreporters.

Arguing that social desirability and memory failure may not be mutually exclusive, Belli et al. (1999) designed new question wording to address both explanations simultaneously (see also Belli et al., 2006; Duff, Hanmer, Park, & White, 2007). The traditional NES turnout question already provides in its introductory script some socially acceptable reasons for not voting such as not being registered, feeling ill or just being busy (see Appendix A). Belli et al. (1999) expanded its wording to include two major modifications. First, they added detailed cues to reduce respondents' memory failure and sources of confusion. Examples of such cues include a reminder that people sometimes say they voted when in fact they did not, or a request that respondents recall events associated with the actual act of voting, such as the drive to the polling place or the weather that day. Second, they included face-saving response items assuring the respondents that not voting was socially acceptable (Belli et al., 1999; see Appendix A).

Belli, Moore and VanHoewyk (2006) report that one month after the elections the long form reduced the percentage of respondents who reported voting by 7.1 percentage points (from 54.6% to 47.5%) and three months after the elections by 15.2 percentage points (from 60.4% to 44.6%). They find similar results among validated overreporters (Belli et al., 1999), showing stronger effects with the passage of time since the election.

At first glance, these results seem to suggest that electoral studies across the globe should seriously consider adopting the new turnout question wording. Indeed, if memory failure alone was the sole cause of overreporting, there would be a strong case for adopting the new question, as memory failure is universal. However, as noted above, even when using the same wording with similar contextual characteristics (such as electoral saliency), countries differ significantly in their levels of overreporting. This variance in the level of overreporting suggests that social desirability varies across nations. Therefore, before we adopt Belli et al.'s new long form question wording universally, we must test its performance outside the United States. Hence, we ask:

RQ1: Does the long form question wording reduce overreporting outside the United States?

In addition, given that earlier research indicates that the long form is better than the short form at eliciting accurate information about electoral behavior as we get further away from Election Day (Belli et al., 1999, 2006), we also ask:

RQ2: Is the wording of the long form question more successful than the short form at eliciting accurate reports about voting behavior long after the election is over?

Methods

Two split-ballot, randomly assigned telephone survey experiments were conducted a year apart among a sample of residents from Kiri'at Tivon and Kiri'at Motzkin, two predominantly Jewish municipalities in Northern Israel with close to national average turnout rates (Table 1). Turnout in Israel's municipal elections hovers just above 50%, this is somewhat lower than in American national elections but significantly higher than the midterm and local elections.

Kiri'at Tivon residents are somewhat more affluent and left-wing than the national average, while those from Kiri'at Motzkin are quite the opposite. Interviews were conducted in Hebrew, with <1% of participants requiring Russian language assistance, which was provided. In both surveys, the experimental group received Belli et al.'s long form voter-turnout question wording, while the control group received the standard NES one (Belli et al., 1999; see Appendix A). The first random-digit-dial, computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) survey was conducted in December 2008, 4–5 weeks following municipal elections, among a sample of residents in the two municipalities for whom we obtained voting ballot-level data. Israeli election law does not permit validating national voting data. It is, however, permitted in local elections. In addition, unlike Israel's national elections, there is no Election Day sabbatical at the municipal level, making it a regular working day, compatible to American studies.

Households in both municipalities were contacted a minimum of four times over five days before they were dropped. Households in which an interview was initially refused were recontacted in an attempt to obtain a completed interview. Following the second refusal, no additional contacts were made ($n = 630$; $\text{Coop1} = 23$).¹

Research tells us that the tendency to overreport increases with the lapse of time (Abelson et al., 1992; Stocké, 2007). In addition, Belli et al. (1999) found the new question wording to be more effective in eliciting accurate voting behavior data long after Election Day had passed. Therefore, we conducted a second survey in the same municipalities in November of 2009, a year after the municipal elections ($n = 850$, $\text{Coop1} = 30\%$). Participants in the first survey were excluded from the second one.

In order to avoid the use of self-reports as a proxy, employed in all of Belli et al.'s studies except the Oregon vote-by-mail study (Belli et al., 1999, 2006), and biases stemming from unreliable official records (Presser, Traugott, & Traugott, 1990), we validated the data at the ballot level. We had full access to the original paper

¹ There is no study of phone survey response rates in Israel, but it is estimated that Coop1 values are between 25% and 32%. Figures provided by Prof. Camil Fuchs, Department of Statistics and Operations Research, School of Mathematical Sciences, Tel Aviv University.

Table 1

Municipalities' Demographics Compared to National Israeli Demographics

	Kiri'at Tivon	Kiri'at Motzkin	Israel
Total population	14,200	39,600	7,373,000
Mean individual monthly income (USD)	\$2,224	\$1,598	\$2,039
Arab population (%)	1.4	0.1	20
Percent of post-1989 immigrants (%)	5.0	22.3	16
Municipal elections turnout (%)	49.9	53.0	51.8
2009 national election votes			
Kadima (Livni) (%)	38.2	32.3	22.5
Likud (Netanyahu) (%)	15.4	23.0	21.6
Labor (Barak) (%)	21.2	12.2	10.0
Israel Beiteinu (Lieberman) (%)	5.9	19.1	11.7
Other (%)	25.20	32.50	45.90

ballot voting lists completed by election officials for each ballot. These data allowed us to verify whether every single one of our respondents had indeed voted by comparing their full names and addresses with those on the ballot lists.

Results

Our data show that 32.2% of nonvoters (8.8% of our sample) in study 1, and 51% of nonvoters (15.9% of our sample) in Study 2, reported that they had voted when in fact they had not (given that about 1% of respondents in both studies were underreporters, they were dropped from our analysis). While the increase in overreporters over time is to be expected (Abelson et al., 1992), these figures are higher than expected for a municipal setting, where levels of participation are low, and the pressure to overreport is lower (Karp & Brockington, 2005). Nevertheless, these findings are compatible with figures from other nations presented above, previous studies on insincere survey responses in Israel (Diskin & Felsenthal, 1981) and with the Israel National Election Study (INES) 2009 data. Results from the INES study indicate that shortly after the 2009 national election 89% of respondents reported that they had voted, while the official national turnout for eligible voters who reside in Israel was 72%.

The objective of this study was to test whether the new question wording introduced by Belli et al. (1999) reduces overreporting outside the United States in comparison to the standard NES version and whether it performs better as we move away from Election Day. Belli et al. (2006) report that the long form outperforms the short form in reducing the number of overreporters, especially with the passage of time since the elections. In our first study, conducted a month after the Israeli municipal elections, the experimental long form wording performed slightly better in reducing overreporting than the standard one (30.8% and 33.8% of nonvoters, respectively). The effect is in the right direction, but reveals no statistically significant difference across the groups ($\chi^2 = 0.82, p = .37$). Our second study, conducted a year after the elections, finds a marginally significant increase in the number of overreporters when

using the long form over the short form (55% and 48%, respectively) ($\chi^2 = 3.56$, $p = .06$). The overall effect of the two studies combined indicates that the long form turnout question does not reduce the number of overreporters. Actually, the standard NES wording significantly outperforms the long form ($\chi^2 = 4.11$, $p = .04$). Finally, as the data above show, the long form's performance does not improve as we move away from Election Day.

Discussion

Previous studies have found that the new wording introduced by Belli et al. (1999) reduces overreporting in surveys. However, a serious limitation, as argued by Belli et al. (2001), has been that all of these studies relied solely on American data. Unfortunately, we find no evidence that the long form outperforms the standard NES wording in reducing overreporting in Israel, nor is the long form superior in reducing overreporting as we move further away from Election Day.

How can we explain these differences? One possibility is the particular nature of local elections, where a lack of social pressure may account for the decrease in overreporting (Karp & Brockington, 2005). However, turnout in these two elections was as high, at times higher, than in most of the studies conducted by Belli and his colleagues, suggesting that the explanation does not lie in the contextual characteristics of these municipal elections.

Given that under similar electoral salience, memory loss should be similar (i.e., the forgetfulness of American voters following an average 55% turnout election should be close to the forgetfulness of Israeli voters in these two municipalities with a 51% turnout), memory failure alone cannot account for the two studies' inconsistent results. Thus, we must consider an alternative explanation, namely, the potential contribution of social desirability across these two cultures.

While voting is a socially desirable behavior in both countries, it is particularly so in Israel, which consistently achieves a 20-point higher turnout rate in both national and local elections when compared to similar elections in the United States. We know that in such a small, close-knit collectivist culture such as Israel, individuals may be inclined to adjust their behavior to national norms, goals and expected behavior, even if doing so requires deception (Seiter, Bruschke, & Bai, 2002; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988; Zhou & Lutterbie, 2005). The long form may, by its sheer length and demand for reflection, foster collectivist behavior, priming Israelis to recall how socially desirable it is to vote and further enhance overreporting.

In the United States, however, the long form may function better because it was constructed with American respondents in mind. America's individualistic culture and its parochial nature may increase the social distance between the respondents and their interviewer, thereby reducing the influence of social desirability. Thus, when confronted with questions such as those on the long form, Americans may answer more truthfully than individuals in other cultures long form (Holbrook, Green, & Krosnick, 2003).

Finally, could it be that our findings are different because we validated each respondent at the ballot level, whereas most of the studies conducted by Belli and his

colleagues are based on self-reports, and the single validated study in Oregon has missing data? Unfortunately, the data do not lend themselves to identify the processes responsible for the variances in these findings. Was the success of the long form in the United States or its failure in Israel idiosyncratic to one or both of these countries? To answer this question, we concur with Belli and his colleagues' suggestion (2006) that the long form be tested not only at weekly intervals, but more importantly, using validated data and in additional settings, especially outside the United States.

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Appendix A

Question Wording for the Two Surveys

Standard NES

The next question is about the elections in November. In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were not registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time. How about you—did you vote in the elections this November?

Experimental (Belli *et al.*, 1999)

The next question is about the elections in November. In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren't registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time. We also sometimes find that people who thought that they had voted actually did not vote. Also, people who usually vote may have trouble saying for sure whether they voted in a particular election. In a moment, I'm going to ask you whether you voted on Tuesday, November 11th, which was [time fill] ago. Before you answer, think of a number of different things that will likely come to mind if you actually did vote this past election day; things like whether you walked, drove, or were driven by another person to your polling place [pause], what the weather was like on the way [pause], the time of day that was [pause], and people you went with, saw, or met while there [pause]. After thinking about it, you may realize that you did not vote in this particular election. [pause]. Now that you have thought about it, which of these statements best describes you?

1. I did not vote in the November 5th election.
2. I thought about voting this time but did not.
3. I usually vote but did not this time.
4. I am sure I voted in the November 5th election.

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