THE POLLS—A Review

QUESTION WORDING AND REPORTS OF SURVEY RESULTS: THE CASE OF LOUIS HARRIS AND ASSOCIATES AND AETNA LIFE AND CASUALTY

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It is now well known that reports of attitudes in surveys are subject to a host of response effects due to question formulation. Even apparently insignificant changes in question wording, form, or context can at times dramatically change the proportions of respondents expressing particular attitudes (see, e.g., Schuman and Presser, 1981). Thus, it seems clear that marginal distributions of responses to attitude measures are not perfect reflections of the distribution of opinion on some issue in a given population. Nonetheless, there are strong demands by policymakers and issue advocates to report marginals as a basis for assessing the public's will on policy matters. Taken together, these realities suggest that, when reporting marginal distributions of responses to attitude questions, survey researchers should report findings using the exact wordings of the questions that were asked (see, e.g., Schuman, 1986). This article describes a recent case in which this was not done.

During September and October of 1986, Louis Harris and Associates conducted a national survey on public attitudes toward the civil justice system and tort law reform (Taylor, Kagay, and Leichenko, 1987). The survey was commissioned by the Aetna Life and Casualty, an insurance company that is often involved in civil litigation and that favors changes in some regulations governing civil lawsuits. The questions asked in the survey addressed topics ranging from citizens' perceptions of current problems with the civil justice system to citizens' attitudes toward proposed changes in the system.

Some results of the survey were reported in an article in the *New York Times* on 7 March 1987 (Newton, 1987). The survey was characterized as indicating that although the public was satisfied with some aspects of the civil justice system, it was dissatisfied with others and favored many reforms. Most importantly, spokesmen from Aetna, the

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Tort Reform Institute, and the Insurance Information Institute were quoted as saying that the poll demonstrates "strong public support" for reforms currently being advocated by these organizations. This claim was presumably based upon the results of nine questions in the survey that measured respondents' attitudes toward a series of proposed changes in the civil justice system.

Four of the six items specifically described in the *New York Times* article were from this set of nine items on proposed changes. These descriptions described levels of public approval for the proposed changes using the words "favor," "support," and "allow" as follows: "Sixty-six percent [of respondents] said they would favor a limit . . ."; "78 percent supported restricting . . ."; "A majority of those polled said they would support limiting . . ."; "Three-quarters of the respondents also said they would allow judges to tell . . ." The summary statements regarding the results said they showed "broad public *support* for changes in the civil justice system" and that the poll's findings "reflected the public's *demand* for reform" (emphasis added).

The findings of the survey were characterized similarly in a press release produced by Aetna and in the Harris report summarizing the survey's findings. For example, the press release began, "An overwhelming majority of Americans support a number of specific reforms to improve the nation's civil justice system." It said as well that "large majorities [of Americans] agree that specific reforms are necessary," that "the public supports many proposed changes in the system," and that "when asked about specific problems in the system, respondents expressed very strong support for changes." Similarly, the Harris report said that "large majorities of Americans support many significant reforms to the civil justice system" (p. 6). In fact, the words "favor" and "support" were used throughout the Harris report to summarize public attitudes toward proposed changes in the civil justice system.

These characterizations of the survey results are questionable for two reasons. First, the questions asked respondents how *acceptable* respondents found each of the proposed changes: respondents indicated whether each proposed change was very acceptable, somewhat acceptable, not too acceptable, or not at all acceptable. But instead of describing the percentages of respondents who found each proposed change acceptable, the *New York Times* and the Aetna press release descriptions claimed to report the proportions of respondents who *favored*, *supported*, *agreed with*, or *would allow* each of them. And the Harris report offered conclusions about the proportions of Americans who supported and favored the changes. Because even apparently slight changes in attitude question wording can sometimes produce large changes in the distributions of responses to them, the proportion of people who reported finding a proposed change acceptable might be

different from the proportion who would have said they favored, supported, agreed with, or would allow each proposed change.

Perhaps even more questionable than this word substitution is the way the response marginals were integrated to generate the proportions of respondents who supposedly favored, supported, agreed with, or would allow each change. In all reports and summaries, this was done by combining the proportions of respondents who said they found each proposed change "very acceptable" or "somewhat acceptable." It is remarkable that items where a large proportion of respondents said "somewhat acceptable" were characterized as indicating "very strong support" for the proposed changes.

These procedures probably produced inappropriate summaries of the relevant survey results. The word *acceptable* is a relatively mild word in comparison to *favor* or *support;* many more people may find a given proposed change acceptable than would favor or support it. Therefore, the use of these latter terms may have led to the appearance of inappropriately high levels of public endorsement. However, it is impossible to be certain that any given survey question wording change would have produced different results without conducting an experimental comparison.

In order to explore whether using the words "favor" or "support" might have produced lower levels of apparent public endorsement of the proposed changes in the civil justice system, a small-scale, informal experiment was conducted. Residents of a variety of suburbs of Columbus, Ohio, were contacted by telephone through a random digit dialing procedure during May 1988.[1] The person who answered the phone was asked whether he or she was willing to be interviewed. If not, the phone call was terminated and a new number was dialed. Two interviewers conducted the phone calls; their refusal rate was 55.0%, yielding a total sample of 60 people who completed interviews.

Respondents who agreed to be interviewed were first asked the first six questions of the Harris/Aetna survey, just as they had been asked by Harris in the original survey. Respondents were then asked one of three versions of the nine questions in the Harris survey that measured attitudes toward proposed changes in the civil justice system. One third of respondents were asked the "proposed changes" questions in exactly the same form in which they appeared in the original Harris/Aetna survey. These questions were introduced as follows:

> I will now read some possible changes that might be made to the civil justice system in this country. For each, please tell me how acceptable it

1. This was accomplished as follows. A number of three-digit exchanges were selected from the Columbus area telephone directory, and four-digit combinations were generated using a random number table in order to complete the phone numbers to be dialed.

Table 1. Percent of Respondents Choosing One of the Two Most Favorable Response Options

Item	Question Form			Statistical Significance of Difference
	Very or Somewhat Acceptable	Strongly or Somewhat Support	Strongly or Somewhat Favor	
1. Requiring injured persons who bring a lawsuit and then lose to pay the lawyer's fees and expenses of the person sued.	70%	47%	65%	.035
2. Having the judge give the jurors specific guidelines about how much in damages should be awarded in cases of a particular type.	70%	37%	90%	.006
3. Placing a "cap" or upper limit of $250,000 on the amount of money that could be awarded for "pain and suffering" and other noneconomic damages which are sometimes awarded in addition to economic damages.	90%	27%	70%	.001
4. Changing the law so that punitive damages, which are awarded on top of other damages to punish defendants, could only be awarded when the defendant's behavior was flagrantly negligent and malicious.	85%	47%	60%	.262
5. Requiring a "sliding fee" for a plaintiff's lawyer, so that, as the dollar size of a case goes up, the amount of money that the lawyer gets also goes up, but not as fast as when the lawyer gets a fixed percentage of the damages.	70%	40%	70%	.038

6. After the jury has decided a lawsuit, having the judge—instead of the jury—set the amount of damages awarded.	60%	17%	68%	.036
7. Requiring a judge to reduce the amount of damages that a jury awards by subtracting the amount of compensation that the victim already has received from health insurance, Workers' Compensation, or other sources, so that the plaintiff does not get compensation twice over.	80%	69%	85%	.819
8. Sometimes two defendants are sued together and lose, and one of them can't pay the damages. In many states, the defendant who can pay is then required to pay all the damages, even if his responsibility for the accident was minor. Some people want to change this, so that defendants would pay only their own share, even if this means that the injured party would receive less in damages than the court awarded.	79%	50%	90%	.022
9. Under the law in most states now, manufacturers are responsible for the products they make. So, if a customer is injured by using a defective product, then the customer can sue the manufacturer for damages—even if the manufacturer was not careless or negligent. Some people want to change this, so that a manufacturer would have to be careless or negligent before they could be held responsible for an injury resulting from their product.	75%	73%	60%	.487
Average	75%	45%	73%	

would be to you personally—very acceptable, somewhat acceptable, not too acceptable, or not acceptable at all. You might think of these as changes that could affect you directly if you are involved in a civil lawsuit.

Another third of respondents were asked instead whether they would "strongly favor," "somewhat favor," "favor a little," or "not favor at all" each proposed change. And the final third of respondents were asked whether they would "strongly support," "somewhat support," "support a little," or "not support at all" each proposed change. Which form of these questions each respondent received was determined randomly.

The results of this informal experiment were in part consistent with intuition and in part surprising (see Table 1). As expected, the response alternative wording variations had statistically significant effects ($p < .04$) on marginal distributions for six of the nine items, and the other three items showed similar trends. Also as expected, more respondents said they found the proposed changes acceptable than said they supported them. For example, 60% of the respondents who were asked the "acceptability" questions said "very acceptable" or "somewhat acceptable" in response to "After a jury has decided a lawsuit, having the judge—instead of the jury—set the amount of the damages." In contrast, only 17% of the respondents who were asked the "support" questions said "strongly support" or "somewhat support" in response to this item, a difference of 43%. An average (mean computed across the nine items) of 75% of respondents chose one of the two most positive response alternatives when the "acceptability" questions were asked, in comparison to only 45% when the "support" questions were asked, a difference of 30%. Thus, many fewer respondents expressed support for the proposed changes than said they would find them acceptable.

However, contrary to expectations, the proportion of respondents who said they strongly or somewhat favored each proposed change was generally quite comparable to the proportion saying they found it very or somewhat acceptable. Averaged across the nine items, 73% of respondents chose the two most positive response options when asked the "favor" questions, in comparison to 75% doing so when asked the "acceptability" questions. A similar result is obtained when only the single most positive response option is considered: 35% versus 31%, respectively. Thus, it seems that comparable results may have been obtained in the Harris survey had respondents been asked about the degree to which they favored each proposed change instead of being asked how acceptable they found each one.

The practice of using the words "support" and "favor" to describe the results of survey questions asking about "acceptability" is clearly

inappropriate in principle, given that question wording changes can sometimes produce large marginals changes. The evidence from this small experiment can hardly be considered conclusive, but it does reinforce this argument in the case of the word "support," though it vindicates use of the word "favor." Also clearly inappropriate is the practice of combining response categories such as "very acceptable" and "somewhat acceptable" and simply reporting a single percentage as the proportion of respondents who "favored" a proposed change. Writing a report of survey results or a newspaper summary of those results using the word "acceptable" over and over again would not make for interesting or easy reading, but it would have been highly preferable in order to accurately communicate this survey's results. Because this was not done, the summaries that Aetna and the *New York Times* published most likely overstated public support for the changes in the civil justice system Aetna advocates.

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