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Abstract

Zaller and Feldman propose a model of survey response and test their theory with data collected in the 1987 Pilot Study. The two-wave Pilot Study contained open-ended probes, asked in conjunction with closed ended domestic policy issue questions. One-half of the sample were given these probes before the closed questions -- the "stop and think" format -- and the other half were asked the open-ended question following the policy questions -- the "retrospective" format. Zaller and Feldman find that the probes are successful in eliciting answers from respondents in both instances. The authors also find that responses to the retrospective probes are good predictors of closed-ended policy issues questions. Specifically, cross-wave repetition of several substantive comments, in response to retrospective probes, is associated with markedly greater stability on closed-ended items. Zaller and Feldman also seek to explain how people translate opinion considerations into opinion statements. They find that the evidence from the Pilot Study responses to the stop and think probes strongly favors a "dominant consideration" model over an "averaging" model. That is, peoples' attitude statements tend to be determined by a single dominant consideration, rather than the sum of a range of considerations.