

Author(s): Alvarez, R. Michael
Title: Survey Measures of Uncertainty
Date: January 9, 1996
Dataset(s): 1995 Pilot Study

Abstract

Alvarez examines the performance of the uncertainty probes tested in the 1995 Pilot Study. These probes attempt to directly measure respondent certainty about both candidate traits and environmental policy opinions. Alvarez finds that the probes seem to be valid measures of certainty. Specifically, the probes show little nonresponse, are correlated at low levels, and differ systematically across individuals in ways predicted by existing theories of information costs. Substantively, people seem more certain about their evaluations of candidate traits than their issue positions but, methodologically, the probes perform in largely the same way across the two sets of items. Alvarez finds that differences in degree of respondent certainty have a number of important substantive implications for the way in which individuals answer survey questions. First, uncertain respondents tend to place themselves and political figures at the middle of issue scales, while certain individuals place themselves and political figures toward the extremes. This relationship holds, even controlling for political information and education. Second, certain information is weighted more than uncertain information when individuals are asked to evaluate political figures. Thus, significant heterogeneity exists among individuals in how they evaluate candidates. Finally, as over-time comparison of Clinton trait assessments demonstrate, the beliefs of certain individuals are more stable than those of uncertain individuals.