

Author(s): Rabinowitz, George and Stuart Elaine Macdonald
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Abstract

Rabinowitz and Macdonald analyze the performance of three sets of issue questions asked in the 1995 NES Pilot Study: (1) multi-point issues items designed to measure self and political figure placements in several issue areas, (2) items which gauge respondents' desired level of government effort towards a number of policy goals, and (3) group linkage items, which ask respondents to associate candidates with specific groups. The authors evaluated these items based on their performance in a series of regressions, using Dole/Clinton feeling thermometer differences as the dependent variable. Rabinowitz and Macdonald find that: (1) The multi-point scale items, which asked respondents to place themselves and major political figures in the areas of environmental policy, crime, and social welfare, were largely ineffective. Only the item which assessed the need for more/less regulation of business to protect the environment both accounted for substantial variation in the dependent variable and was robust to controls for both party identification and ideology. (2) The effort item format worked well when the target domain was the environment or employment policy, but was less powerful when applied to crime or welfare policy. The authors conclude that the effort item format could prove useful in an appropriate context, but see no reason to replace the existing spending format items on due to question series continuity concerns. (3) The group linkage questions did a reasonable job of distinguishing between the candidates, but were somewhat disappointing because there was a strong tendency for people to see the candidates as supporting legislation favored by the groups. Thus, while the linkage questions provided some interesting descriptive information, they did not perform as well as expected and should, therefore, be improved upon before they are moved onto future survey efforts.