

June 11, 1984

MEMO TO: NES Board

FROM: Santa

CONCERNING: Two versions of the abortion question

Since 1972, the NES has asked respondents for their opinion on abortion; specifically, the conditions under which it should be permitted. In 1980, a new version of the question was asked in two of the 8 data collection waves. This new version was added (as I understand it) in order to modernize the question and also to make it conform with General Social Survey wording. The new version was the only abortion question asked in 1982. The core-mockup continues to define the original question as core. This memo is an attempt to provide information which will be helpful in deciding which version of the question to use in the 1984 pre-post. The response alternatives (and question text) of both versions are as follows.

Original

- Q. There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view?
1. Abortion should never be permitted.
 2. Abortion should be permitted only if the life and health of the woman is in danger.
 3. Abortion should be permitted if, due to personal reasons, the woman would have difficulty in caring for the child.
 4. Abortion should never be forbidden, since one should not require a woman to have a child she doesn't want.

Revised

Q. There has been some discussion about abortion in recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best represents your point of view?

1. By law, abortion should never be permitted.
2. The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest or when the woman's life is in danger.
3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest or danger to the woman's life but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established.
4. By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.

The response alternatives to the two questions are substantially different, quite apart from the introduction of "by law" as the permitting agency. While the new version ties down the referent in a way which is probably desirable, it does not conform to the GSS wording in any other way.

In the GSS wording, the respondent is read a series of response options asking if he/she agrees with each. In our mode, the respondent looks at a page in the respondent booklet and selects one alternative. The question text is: Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if . . . 1.) there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby (yes/no); 2.) if she is married and does not want any more children; 3.) if the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy; 4.) if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children; 5.) if she became pregnant as a result of rape; 6.) if she is not married and does not want to marry the man; 7.) if

the woman wants it for any reason?

Except for the reference to legal abortion, it doesn't seem that either of our versions is very similar to the GSS, so that comparability with GSS probably should not be the basis for choosing between the versions.

The two NES questions do elicit a consistently different response pattern.

Table 1: Original and revised responses in 1980

| | Original | | | Revised | |
|----|-------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| | C1 (Jan) | P2 (June) | C3Po (Nov/Dec) | C3 Sept/Oct. | P3 Sept. |
| 1. | 10.6 | 10.0 | 9.9 | 11.4 | 10.9 |
| 2. | 43.1 | 44.7 | 45.1 | 32.3 | 33.1 |
| 3. | 19.0 | 19.1 | 18.2 | 18.8 | 21.0 |
| 4. | 26.3 | 25.1 | 27.8 | 36.4 | 34.0 |
| | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

I selected C3 and C3Po where the same respondents were asked the revised version (in C3) and looked at response patterns in different subgroups. (See Table 2) These differences show up with great consistency in all of the subgroups checked. Whatever the percentage of respondents agreeing to the most liberal response alternative in the revised version as asked in C3--(By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice)--7-12% fewer could choose the most liberal alternatives in the original version, as used in C3Po (abortion should never be forbidden, since one should not

require a woman to have a child she doesn't want). Put another way, the "by law" response alternative systematically gets more favorable responses. In the revised version, from 9-15% fewer selected the second (conservative) alternative "rape, incest or when woman's life is in danger"--than the original second conservative permission "if the life and health (emphasis added) of the woman is in danger." There is a smaller but also consistent tendency for the most conservative alternative--never be permitted--to be slightly more favored when "by law" is added to the wording. Note especially education, where the impact of "by law" appears to diminish, small though it is, as we move up in the educational attainment of the respondent.

One conclusion possible, is that respondents are carefully distinguishing between legal and moral/ethical prohibitions of (or permission for) abortion. For example, while 86% of those who say abortion should never be forbidden are also willing to say that by law it should never be forbidden, while only 64.1% of those who say abortion should never be forbidden by law are also willing to say categorically that abortion should never be forbidden. Conversely, while 57.7% (row 1, col 1) of those who say that abortion should never be permitted are willing to endorse an absolute legal prohibition, only 47.5% of those who say never permitted by law are willing to say categorically that abortion should never be permitted. These differences also hold up across all subgroups.

This conclusion, or any conclusion here, would be more supportable if the response alternatives were more similarly worded. The quite concrete "No woman should be required to have a child she doesn't want"

has, at least to me, an entirely different connotation than the relatively airy "a matter of personal choice," going along with the by-law alternative. So I think that there are at least two wording variants responsible for the distribution changes--the response alternatives wording, and separately, the addition of the legal referent.

The original core item has some continuity over time (since 1972) that the revised item does not. But insofar as the two items are obviously consistently measuring somewhat different attitudes, our choice may have to be based on which of these attitudes is thought to be more useful in the study of political behavior.

Table 2. Comparison of Responses in Demographic Subgroups for Revised (C3) and Original (C3Po) Versions of Abortion Question

| | 2a Overall | | 2b. Sex | | | | 2c. Age | | | | | |
|----|------------|-------|---------|-------|-------|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|
| | C3 C3Po | | Men | | Women | | 17 - 30 | | 40 - 59 | | 60 - 99 | |
| | Rev. | Orig. | Rev. | Orig. | Rev. | Orig. | Rev. | Orig. | Rev. | Orig. | Rev. | Orig. |
| 1. | 11.7 | 9.9 | 11.3 | 9.1 | 12.0 | 10.1 | 9.2 | 8.1 | 13.0 | 10.2 | 15.6 | 12.3 |
| 2. | 31.6 | 45.1 | 30.2 | 43.7 | 32.6 | 44.1 | 28.2 | 37.8 | 31.3 | 46.8 | 39.2 | 53.4 |
| 3. | 18.5 | 18.2 | 21.6 | 21.0 | 16.1 | 15.8 | 19.0 | 21.7 | 18.3 | 15.5 | 17.6 | 13.6 |
| 4. | 36.9 | 27.8 | 35.0 | 24.9 | 38.4 | 29.5 | 42.9 | 31.7 | 35.4 | 26.4 | 25.9 | 19.6 |

| | 2d. Marital Status | | | | 2e. Religion | | | | | | | |
|----|--------------------|------|--------------|------|--------------|------|---------|------|------------|------|----------|------|
| | Married | | Nev. Married | | Div./Sep. | | Widowed | | Protestant | | Catholic | |
| | Rev | Orig | Rev | Orig | Rev | Orig | Rev | Orig | Rev | Orig | Rev | Orig |
| 1. | 11.7 | 9.4 | 7.9 | 7.9 | 11.7 | 9.2 | 17.2 | 13.8 | 12.1 | 10.1 | 15.2 | 12.6 |
| 2. | 33.7 | 46.0 | 23.8 | 34.2 | 23.9 | 36.2 | 38.6 | 54.5 | 32.0 | 47.3 | 38.2 | 48.2 |
| 3. | 17.9 | 18.2 | 17.8 | 20.8 | 22.7 | 19.0 | 17.9 | 12.4 | 19.4 | 17.6 | 18.1 | 18.4 |
| 4. | 35.0 | 25.5 | 49.5 | 37.5 | 41.1 | 33.7 | 25.5 | 18.6 | 35.3 | 24.0 | 27.2 | 20.1 |

| | 2f. Education | | | | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------|------|------|------|---------|------|------|------|---------|------|
| | 8 grade or less | | 9-11 | | HS Dip. | | HS + | | College | |
| | Rev | Orig | Rev | Orig | Rev | Orig | Rev | Orig | Rev | Orig |
| 1. | 27.1 | 22.9 | 17.6 | 13.3 | 11.0 | 7.6 | 9.1 | 8.3 | 5.7 | 4.5 |
| 2. | 44.3 | 53.6 | 40.4 | 55.3 | 35.0 | 48.0 | 29.8 | 41.3 | 18.4 | 31.6 |
| 3. | 9.3 | 10.7 | 12.8 | 12.8 | 21.1 | 22.8 | 18.3 | 18.1 | 23.8 | 19.7 |
| 4. | 17.9 | 10.7 | 27.7 | 18.1 | 32.1 | 21.1 | 41.7 | 31.5 | 50.0 | 43.4 |