

TO: Steve R., NES Planning Committee
 FROM: Santa

RE: The Political Interest Variable on the 1984 Election Study

Here are the distributions of the "Political Interest" variable in RXS (RDD sample) and the Pre-election Survey.

TABLE 1. Political Interest

	PRE-ELECTION	RXS BEFORE ELECTION	RXS 8/23 TO 11/6
Very interested	28.4	48.6	52.1
Somewhat	46.4	37.1	35.0
Not much	24.8	13.8	12.6
	N=2257	N=3238	N= 839

The difference in very "interested" category is large and troubling. The pre-election distribution is not an abnormally low reading for the fall election study.

TABLE 2. Sourcebook Distribution of Political Interest

1970	1972	1976	1978	1980	1982*	1984
34	32	37	22	30	26	28
43	41	42	45	44	44	46
24	27	21	34	26	30	25

* F-T-F only

Note also that RXS shows a constant trend of high levels of interest.

TABLE 3. RXS Distribution by Version Number

Date Begun:	1/11	2/29	3/28	4/13	6/20	7/12	7/19	8/23	10/8	10/12	10/22
version #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Very	48	48	46	47	43	45	51	53	52	50	52
Somewhat	40	40	38	36	40	39	36	35	43	36	32
Not Much	13	11	16	16	16	16	13	12	6	14	16

Is this a difference due to mode of interview? Two bits of evidence make it appear not. Table 4 shows 1982 F-T-F and telephone comparison, Table 5 shows interest for 1984 divided by whether household has phone or not.

TABLE 4. 1982 Political Interest by Mode

	F-T-F	Telephone
Very interested	25.9	26.0
Somewhat	44.2	46.7
Not Much	29.8	27.4

TABLE 5. Pre-Election Political Interest by Phone or Not

	Have Telephone	Don't Have Telephone	Overall
Very Interested	29.2	20.0	28.3
Somewhat	46.9	42.4	46.7
Not Much	23.6	37.6	24.7

Together, these tables suggest that political interest differences are not associated with differences in modes. Indeed, the 1982 MCP comparison is stronger, because the F-T-F and telephone respondents are different samples, one area-probability, the other RDD.

Nor, as table 6 shows, would it be easy to ascribe these differences to the now well-known RXS education bias...too few 8th grade or less, and way too many college attendees.

TABLE 6. Levels of Education by Political Interest

	RXS - Aug. 23 - Nov 5			Pre-Post - Sept. 4 - Nov 5		
	Very	Somewhat	Not Much	Very	Somewhat	Not Much
8th grade	50	30	20	23	31	44
9-12	45	34	21	21	42	37
H.S.	48	38	15	25	47	28
College	56	34	10	35	51	13
	N=839			N=2257		

At every level of education, RXS respondents are by a wide margin more likely to report being very interested in the campaign.

In turning to the actual questionnaire, one finds non-trivial differences in question wording and question context. To begin with, the political interest variable in the Pre-Post opens the study. In RXS, the political interest question comes after several minutes of warm-up. What is probably more to the point, however, is that, in RXS, the political interest question follows immediately after a general question asking whether R follows public affairs. The R virtually must give at least as strong an answer to interest in campaign as to following public affairs; and we may also suspect a strong impetus to redeem an expression of moderate to low interest in public affairs with a warmer interest in the campaign.

Looking closely at the two questions, differences in wording are apparent.

Pre-election A1.

Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you? Would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in the political campaigns so far this year?

RXS B2.

Let's switch to the presidential campaign for a minute. Would you say that you are very much interested, somewhat interested or not much interested in following the presidential campaign in 1984?

There are two notable differences. The Pre question begins with permission to admit little or no interest, permission that is absent on RXS. Also, the Pre question refers to the relatively nebulous "political campaign" as opposed to the more pointed "presidential campaign." One notes, too, that "you are" is a stronger construction than "you have been."

The moral of this story is: similarly worded questions may be actually quite different measurements of a concept. There are conflicting demands on a survey questionnaire: ease of presentation by interviewers is quite important, as is, for NES at least, consistency with the time-series. These demands need continually to be reconciled with recognition of the effects of question order and wording.

