

## **Analysis of Interest in Politics Items from the 2006 Pilot**

January, 2007

Danielle Shani<sup>1</sup>

Princeton University

The 2006 Pilot Study tested three new items that attempted to improve upon current NES measures of interest in politics and attention to politics (Mod14). The items appeared in a split-sample design such that half of the respondents were randomly selected to receive the new items and the other half were asked the traditional NES questions about interest in the campaign and following government and public affairs. Below I compare these measures to determine whether the proposed items add anything distinctive to the study of political learning and participation, whether the magnitude of the differences are sizable, and whether they reflect prior hypotheses. Overall, I conclude that the existing NES measures perform as well as the alternatives carried on the Pilot. The only case in which a proposed measure seems to have outperformed the current items was, in fact, opposite to expectations.

### Expectations

The 2006 Pilot incorporated three new questions with the following wording and order (Module A):

1. How interested are you in information about what's going on in government and politics? Extremely interested, very interested, moderately interested, slightly interested, or not interested at all?
2. How closely to you pay attention to information about what's going on in government and politics? Extremely closely, very closely, moderately closely, slightly closely, or not closely at all?
3. How often do you pay attention to what's going on in government and politics? All the time, most of the time, about half the time, once in a while, or never?

The traditional NES measures were offered to the other half of the sample with their standard wording and in the following order (Module B):

1. 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 this year?
2. Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?

Two shared features in the alternative items were meant to improve upon the current questions: first, they all use the most advantageous five response categories, instead of three or four, and as a result, they all offer more obvious endpoints. Instead of "very much interested" or "most of the time" as the highest category, they give the option of "extremely interested" or "all the time"; instead of "not much interested" or "hardly at

---

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Larry Bartels, Martin Gilens, and Andrew Owen, for their helpful suggestions and comments.

all” as the lowest category, they offer “not interested at all” or “never.” Secondly, by substituting “government and public affairs” or “political campaigns” with “government and politics” they attempted to enhance the clarity of the questions, while still referring to a broad and general category. Additionally, the item that asks specifically about interest in “information about what’s going on” instead of the more elusive “interested” was designed to gauge motivation to learn about politics, as distinct from motivation to participate in politics, and to address the motive, not the behavior (unlike “paying attention” or “following,” which are clearly behavioral). A substantial part of this report explores whether this item was successful in this regard.

The analysis below relies on the 665 respondents who participated in the “advance release” of the 2006 pilot study (336 in Modula A, 329 in Modula B). These respondents were interviewed previously in the 2004 time-series study, and so I merged the pilot data with the 2004 dataset in order to utilize both the responses to the traditional measures of political interest in 2004, for which I have data from all respondents, and numerous other measures of engagement in politics. All the variables I use were recoded to range from 0 to 1, with 1 indicating higher values.

### Descriptive Statistics

The first thing worth noting is that the individuals who were interviewed in the pilot study are, on average, more interested in politics than the full sample drawn in 2004. If one compares the mean interest of the pilot respondents with that of all respondents in 2004, the levels of interest of the former are consistently between 0.05 to 0.06 higher on a 0-1 scale (this applies both to the item on following public affairs and to the questions on campaign interest in the pre-election and post-election studies). The more important comparison for our purposes, though, is within the pilot respondents. Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of the various political interest items from the 2004 post-election study, restricted only to the pilot respondents, and from the 2006 pilot study, which was also administered after the elections.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Political Interest and Attention items**

	Interest in Information (2006)	Closeness of Attention (2006)	Frequency of Attention (2006)	Interest in Campaign (2006)	Follow Public Affairs (2006)	Interest in Campaign (2004)	Follow Public Affairs (2004)
Mean	0.67	0.60	0.66	0.65	0.74	0.76	0.67
Median	0.75	0.50	0.75	0.50	0.67	1.00	0.67
Mode	0.75	0.50	0.75	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.67
Variance	0.049	0.050	0.052	0.134	0.092	0.096	0.091
N	335	336	336	329	329	636	633

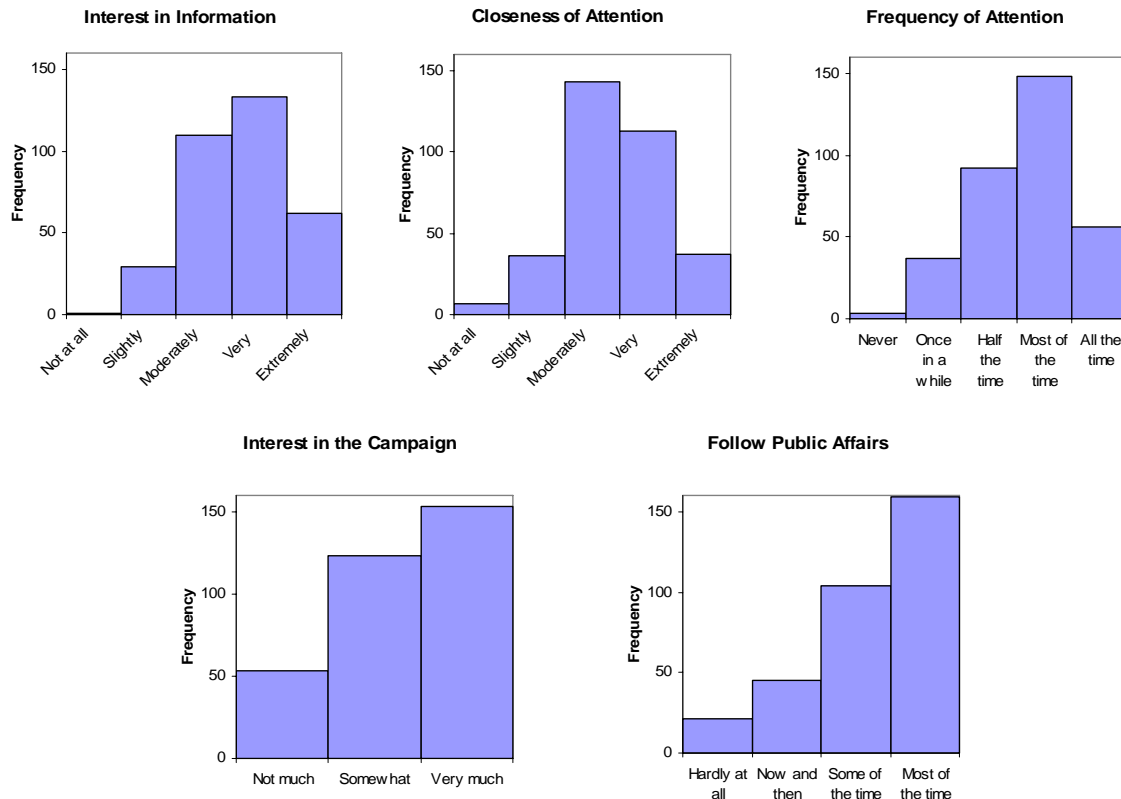
Among the pilot respondents, the mean level of interest in the campaign dropped in 2006 by 0.11 compared to 2004, which is pretty close to the typical 8-percentage-points difference between the levels of interest witnessed in presidential campaigns and in off-presidential campaigns in the NES time-series. More surprisingly, interest in public affairs, which is normally not sensitive to the electoral context, rose sharply during this time from 0.67 to 0.74 on a 0-to-1 scale. Even after adjusting this figure downwards by 0.05-0.06 to account for the unusually high interest of the pilot respondents, this would be the highest level of general interest in politics ever recorded in the NES, since it first

started asking this question in 1964. It would be worth looking at the level of interest reported in the 2006 time-series study, when it becomes available, to see if this change is indeed representative.

If one compares the mean values for the pilot items, following public affairs is by far the highest (0.74), campaign interest, interest in information about what’s going on in government and politics, and the frequency of attention to politics all have similar means of 0.65-0.67, and the question on how closely one pays attention to political information, which arguably sets a more demanding criterion, has the lowest mean (0.60). A noticeable and significant difference between the module A and module B items is their mode. Unlike any of the new items, both of the traditional NES questions have the highest category of interest as the most frequently reported one with almost half of the respondents classifying themselves in this category (for campaign interest, this was also the case in the 2004 pre and post-election studies). This distribution seems quite implausible and would certainly impede attempts to research the group of especially interested citizens.

As Figure 1 shows, each of the three new items generated a distribution that is much closer to being normal than the current NES measures. In this regard, offering “extremely interested” or “all the times” as the highest endpoints rather than “very much interested” or “most of the times” seems useful. The same could not be said, though, for the lowest endpoint: the proposed alternatives of “not interested at all” or “never” led to essentially empty categories. Hence, it might be worth trying to soften the wording of this last category by switching back to “hardly at all” or “almost never”. The variance of the new items is lower than the existing ones, which is precisely what one would expect if the underlying distribution is the same but the new questions map them to a scale with more extreme endpoints.

Figure 1: Distributions of Responses to Module A and Module B Pilot Items



To check the adequacy of the response categories, I also compared their means on various dependent variables to see if the resulting patterns are sensible. I grouped each of the new items to four categories, instead of the original five, combining the two lowest levels of interest into one, due to the very low frequency in the last response category. In the standard NES questions, I used the existing three or four categories. As dependent variables I employed the interviewer's rating of the respondent's level of information, a scale of political knowledge, the ability to correctly locate the parties' and the candidates' relative ideology and issue positions, the richness of the respondent's considerations for liking or disliking both candidates and parties, recalled turnout in 2000, reported turnout in 2004, a scale of campaign activity, a scale of other forms of participation, and membership in organizations.<sup>2</sup> In all of these cases, one would expect individuals who are more interested in politics or attentive to politics to have higher values. Indeed, the comparison of means supports this expectation. I did not find any strange patterns in the new or existing items, and in the rare cases where the difference between a group with higher level of interest and a group with lower level of interest carried a negative sign, the difference was always minute and far from being statistically significant in any conventional level.

Finally, none of the questions generated an alarming amount of missing data: four of the items were fully responded by all the participants and the question on interest in information was refused by only one respondent.

### Correlates

The intercorrelations between the pilot items and between them and the 2004 measures of political interest are presented in Table 2. All entries are Pearson's *r*'s and they are all statistically significant at the 0.1% level. Few observations are worth noting: First, the new items hang together extremely well. In fact, the strong correlations between the three of them (0.62-0.66) and the exceptionally high alpha reliability of 0.83 raise the suspicion that they might be redundant.

**Table 2: Correlations among Interest and Attention Items**

	Module A			Module B	
	Interest in Information	Closeness of Attention	Frequency of Attention	Interest in Campaign	Follow Public Affairs
Closeness of Attention (2006)	0.656				
Frequency of Attention (2006)	0.622	0.638			
Follow Public Affairs (2006)				0.594	
Interest in Campaign (2004-pre)	0.486	0.426	0.398	0.528	0.475
Interest in Campaign (2004-post)	0.442	0.294	0.321	0.497	0.481
Follow Public Affairs (2004-post)	0.556	0.585	0.526	0.537	0.558

Second, the alternative measures are related very closely, perhaps too closely, to the traditional question on general interest in politics (whether one follows public affairs), far

<sup>2</sup> See appendix A at the end of this report for full details on the coding of these variables.

more than to the campaign interest items. The correlation between the new questions and the 2004 report of general interest is as strong as the correlation between the 2004 and 2006 measures of general interest, and in the case of interest in information about politics the correlations are identical. The alpha reliability of the new items and the 2004 measure of general interest is 0.84 and a factor analysis of the pilot questions with the standard ones from the 2004 study extracts one factor with unusually high loadings for the new items and the traditional one on general interest in politics (0.77-0.81), and with lower but still strong loadings for the measures of campaign interest (0.64-0.69). Clearly, these findings make one wonder whether the suggested items measure anything distinct from the present inventory. They also guide us to focus on the comparison between the proposed items and the traditional question on general interest in politics.

**Table 3: Correlations between Pilot Items and Construct Variables from 2004**

	Module A			Module B	
	Interest in Information	Closeness of Attention	Frequency of Attention	Interest in Campaign	Follow Public Affairs
<b>Learning</b>					
Interviewer Information Rating	0.323	0.316	0.296	0.458	0.494
Political Knowledge	0.425	0.400	0.436	0.429	0.455
Locating Parties' Relative Ideology	0.189	0.051 <sup>^</sup>	0.156	0.255	0.214
Locating Parties' Relative Issue Positions	0.278	0.280	0.301	0.265	0.318
Locating Candidates' Relative Ideology	0.194	0.140	0.208	0.291	0.266
Locating Candidates' Relative Issue Positions	0.207	0.230	0.201	0.289	0.348
Richness of Party Considerations	0.249	0.195	0.204	0.294	0.325
Richness of Candidate Considerations	0.207	0.104 <sup>^</sup>	0.182	0.306	0.261
<b>Participation</b>					
Turnout in 2000	0.326	0.299	0.264	0.304	0.238
Turnout in 2004	0.263	0.161	0.219	0.204	0.281
Campaign Activity	0.375	0.276	0.196	0.292	0.306
Other forms of Participation	0.251	0.215	0.198	0.166	0.211
Membership in Organizations	0.024 <sup>^</sup>	0.057 <sup>^</sup>	0.062 <sup>^</sup>	0.158	0.149
<b>Media</b>					
Frequency of Exposure to News in Media	0.217	0.317	0.314	0.323	0.325
How Much Attention to News in Media	0.330	0.325	0.352	0.454	0.428
Exposure to News about the Campaign	0.290	0.311	0.349	0.351	0.373
How Much Attention to News about the Campaign	0.422	0.342	0.375	0.517	0.489
<b>Other</b>					
Whether R Ever Discusses Politics	0.295	0.224	0.232	0.258	0.307
Frequency of Discussion of Politics	0.358	0.315	0.240	0.335	0.342
Caring Who Wins the House	0.427	0.333	0.236	0.472	0.460
Caring Who Wins the Presidency	0.263	0.150	0.139	0.320	0.343

<sup>^</sup> Not Significant at the 5% level.

The most suitable test for the validity of the proposed items is construct validity.<sup>3</sup> To assess this, I compare Pearson r correlations between the pilot measures and other measures of concepts that theoretically are expected to be related to the concepts of political interest and/or attention. As construct variables, I exploit only items from the 2004 NES time-series study, which have already obtained relatively high validity and reliability, unlike the items from the 2006 Pilot. This choice should contribute to our confidence in the findings (Carmines and Zeller, 1979: 26).

If the proposed questions are successful at measuring the underlying concepts, we should expect the following: First, the item that asks specifically about interest in

<sup>3</sup> See: Edward G. Carmines and Richard A. Zeller (1979), *Reliability and Validity Assessment*, Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences: (no. 17), Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications: Pages: 22-27.

information about what's going on in government and politics should be more strongly correlated with political learning and less strongly correlated to political participation compared to the traditional NES measures. Secondly, the questions on how closely one pays attention to political information and how often one does so should be more closely related to measures of frequency of exposure and amount of attention to news in the media, than the existing measures of political attentiveness.

Neither of the hypotheses is supported by the data (see Table 3 above). The new items on closeness and frequency of attention to politics have weaker correlations with virtually all measures of learning, participation, and most relevantly, each of the items in the media battery, than the standard measure of whether one follows public affairs. Most strikingly, the correlation between the proposed items and questions on how much attention one pays to news in the media or to news about the campaign vary between 0.325 and 0.375, while the corresponding figures for the traditional item is 0.43-0.49.

The findings for the interest in information question are not more encouraging. The correlations between this item and various measures of political participation are actually higher, overall, than any of the existing NES measures of interest in politics, but the magnitude of the differences is not huge, and more importantly, the result is contrary to the original expectation. Additionally, despite the fact that the new item was designed to capture motivation to learn, it has consistently weaker correlations with evidence of information gains compared to the standard NES question on general interest in politics, and in almost all cases compared to the interest in the campaign question as well. These findings are supported also by the relative sizes of the coefficients, adjusted R-squares, and residual errors of a series of OLS bivariate regression analyses, which used the above participation and learning measures as dependent variables, as well as by multivariate regressions in which I examined whether the interest in information item adds anything distinctive to the explanation of the same variables over and above the impact of general political interest as measured in 2004 (this was compared with the additional effect of general interest as recorded in 2006, when the 2004 report serves again as a baseline). In all of these analyses, the bottom-line was the same: to the extent that specific interest in political information, as measured in the pilot study, might advance our understanding of democratic politics, it is actually in explaining participation, not learning.

#### Social Desirability Effect?

One concern that one might raise about the findings presented so far is that social desirability effects are distorting the relationships. The pilot items lack the introduction that accompanies the standard NES questions on political interest and was presumably designed to lessen social desirability pressures (i.e. "Some people seem to follow... Others aren't that interested"). If the responses to the new items are more polluted with social desirability considerations than the existing ones, their correlation with the construct variables might be lower than they should be, or alternatively, they might be artificially high if the other measures of participation, learning, and media exposure also suffer from a social desirability problem.

To ease this concern, I exploit an experiment with the turnout question that was undertaken in the 2004 NES and was specifically designed to mitigate the social desirability of saying that one voted in the elections. This is the only item with "civic duty" type of social desirability effect that I could find in the 2004 NES. The setup was

the following: a randomly selected half of the sample received the traditional turnout question which offers two response categories: “Yes, voted”, or “No, didn’t vote.” The other half was given the same question but with four response options: “I did not vote”, “I thought about voting this time but didn’t”, “I usually vote but didn’t this time”, or “I am sure I voted”. The hope was that by giving people an acceptable excuse for not turning out to vote, the problem of over-reporting would be reduced and, indeed, Duff et al. (2004) find that the new item seems “to mitigate the problem of overestimating the turnout rate.”<sup>4</sup>

With the caveat that splitting the sample even further leaves us with pretty small groups (N=152 to 164), this experiment is very useful for our purposes: equipped with one version of the turnout question that is subject to social desirability effects and one that alleviates this problem, one could test whether social desirability is more of a problem in the pilot measures of political interest compared to the traditional ones. If both the political interest pilot items and the standard turnout item are polluted with socially desirable “civic duty” responses, then the relationship between them should be stronger than the relationship between the new questions on political interest and the experimental item on turnout. As Table 4 shows, this is not the case. With both of the turnout items coded as dummies, the pilot questions are actually less strongly associated with the standard turnout item, which is known to be subject to social desirability problems, and more strongly correlated with the experimental version of the turnout question, which successfully diminishes the problem. This finding should dismiss the concern that the proposed measures of political interest are polluted with social desirability effects.

**Table 4: Testing for Social Desirability Effect in the Pilot Items**

	Module A			Module B	
	Interest in Information	Closeness of Attention	Frequency of Attention	Interest in Campaign	Follow Public Affairs
Standard Turnout Item	0.181 (N=163)	0.062 (N=164)	0.107 (N=164)	0.255 (N=163)	0.356 (N=163)
Experimental Turnout Item	0.326 (N=157)	0.251 (N=157)	0.313 (N=157)	0.167 (N=152)	0.233 (N=152)

### Effects

As a final test for the performance of the proposed question on interest in information, I evaluated whether it makes a unique contribution to two notable models for explaining political learning and political participation, in which political interest figures as the single most important variable. The first is Verba et al.’s model for predicting overall political participation and the second is Luskin’s model for explaining political sophistication.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, I present adjusted models based on the variables

<sup>4</sup> See: Brian Duff, Michael J. Hanmer, Won-ho Park, and Ismail K. White (2004), *How Good is This Excuse?: Correction of Overreporting of Voter Turnout Bias in the 2002 American National Election Study*, ANES Technical Report Series, No. nes010872.

<sup>5</sup> See: Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady (1995), *Voice and Equality*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press; Robert C. Luskin (1990), “Explaining Political Sophistication,” *Political Behavior* (12:4): pp. 331-361.

that were available in the 2004 NES.<sup>6</sup> All variables – dependent and independent - were recoded to a zero-to-one scale, with one indicating higher values. The exact coding of the variables and the differences from Verba’s and Luskin’s measurements appear in appendices B and C, respectively. I estimate both models with OLS.<sup>7</sup>

Each model is estimated four times, changing only one variable: the measurement of political interest. This variable alternates between the standard question on following public affairs as recorded in the 2006 pilot study; the proposed item on interest in information using the full five response categories that appeared in the pilot questionnaire; the same item on interest in information but with just four response categories (combining the one respondent who answered that he/she is not interested at all with those who reported slight interest), thus facilitating the comparison with the traditional measure of general interest which also carries four values; and a pooled measure which combines the responses from both modules to one measure of political interest (pooling together the question on following public affairs and the 4-response version of interest in information).<sup>8</sup> In the latter case, the model also includes a dummy for the module (not reported in the tables below), where 1 indicates the proposed item (module A), and an interaction between this dummy and the political interest variable. The advantage of the last approach is fourfold: it offers a direct way to assess whether the difference in the magnitude of the coefficients is statistically significant, it forces the impact of the other variables in the model to be the same, it takes into account any remaining dissimilarities in the allocation of the respondents to two groups, despite the randomization, and it provides an opportunity to estimate the model with a larger N.

Let me start with Verba et al.’s model of political participation. Verba’s index of overall activity includes eight items, six of which appear in the 2004 NES and were added to create the dependent variable “Activity-Verba” (alpha=0.55). The items are: turnout in the 2004 elections; doing campaign work for one of the parties or candidates; making a contribution to a candidate, party, or any other groups that supports candidates in elections; contacting a public official to express one’s views; taking part in a protest, march, or demonstration; and working with others in the community to deal with some problem facing the community.<sup>9</sup> I also test the model on a more elaborate scale of political activity (“Activity-Full”) adding four more components: going to campaign rallies or speeches, displaying a campaign button or sticker, trying to influence others’ vote, and attending a meeting about an issue in the community or school (alpha=0.70).

The results are reported in Table 5. The modified model seems to be a reasonable approximation in the sense that the unadjusted R<sup>2</sup> in Verba’s model is 0.44 and in the adapted version, which lacks a couple of Verba’s variables, it ranges between 0.26 and

---

<sup>6</sup> I did not find any surrogates for a couple of the variables in Verba’s model: citizenship, English spoken at home, vocabulary, free time, and civil skills (i.e. job, organizational, and church skills). These are absent from my model. I have all the variables in Luskin’s model.

<sup>7</sup> Verba et al. estimate the model both with OLS (table 12.5, p. 352) and with two-stage least squares (table 12.6, p. 353). Luskin also uses two-stage least squares (table 2, p. 343).

<sup>8</sup> I also did the same exercise on both Verba’s and Luskin’s models comparing the interest in information question with the traditional interest in the campaign item, instead of the one on following public affairs. The substantive conclusions were the same.

<sup>9</sup> The two additional components in Verba’s model, which are absent in the 2004 NES, are serving in a voluntary capacity on any local government board or council or attending meetings of such a board or council regularly, and being a member of or giving money to a political organization.



**Table 5: The Effect of the Pilot Measure of Political Interest in Verba's Model of Political Participation**

	Follow Public Affairs		Interest in Information (5)		Interest in Information (4)		Pooled Political Interest	
	Activity - Verba	Activity - Full	Activity - Verba	Activity - Full	Activity - Verba	Activity - Full	Activity - Verba	Activity - Full
<b>Resources</b>								
Education	0.038 (0.048)	0.042 (0.048)	0.103 (0.040)	0.082 (0.041)	0.105 (0.040)	0.084 (0.041)	0.068 (0.030)	0.056 (0.031)
Family Income	0.024 (0.053)	-0.013 (0.054)	0.033 (0.041)	0.038 (0.043)	0.032 (0.041)	0.037 (0.043)	0.028 (0.032)	0.015 (0.033)
<b>Institutional Affiliation</b>								
Job Level	0.036 (0.028)	-0.001 (0.029)	0.026 (0.023)	0.044 (0.024)	0.026 (0.023)	0.044 (0.024)	0.030 (0.018)	0.020 (0.018)
Organizational Affiliation	0.119 (0.022)	0.117 (0.023)	0.132 (0.019)	0.113 (0.020)	0.131 (0.019)	0.112 (0.020)	0.123 (0.015)	0.114 (0.015)
Religious Attendance	-0.008 (0.032)	0.017 (0.032)	0.087 (0.027)	0.066 (0.028)	0.087 (0.027)	0.066 (0.028)	0.034 (0.020)	0.037 (0.021)
<b>Political Engagement</b>								
Political Information	0.071 (0.048)	0.110 (0.048)	0.050 (0.037)	0.044 (0.039)	0.051 (0.037)	0.046 (0.039)	0.058 (0.029)	0.075 (0.030)
Political Efficacy	-0.046 (0.044)	-0.047 (0.044)	-0.081 (0.038)	-0.066 (0.040)	-0.082 (0.039)	-0.067 (0.040)	-0.059 (0.029)	-0.051 (0.029)
Partisan Strength	0.082 (0.035)	0.101 (0.035)	0.081 (0.030)	0.078 (0.031)	0.082 (0.030)	0.078 (0.031)	0.082 (0.023)	0.092 (0.023)
Political Interest	0.167 (0.044)	0.171 (0.044)	0.262 (0.048)	0.311 (0.050)	0.196 (0.036)	0.233 (0.038)	0.177 (0.037)	0.182 (0.038)
Political Interest*Module							0.013 (0.048)	0.036 (0.049)
Constant	0.000 (0.058)	-0.030 (0.058)	-0.074 (0.046)	-0.093 (0.048)	-0.009 (0.042)	-0.017 (0.044)	-0.012 (0.040)	-0.030 (0.041)
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.243	0.238	0.381	0.353	0.380	0.352	0.312	0.299
S.E. of Reg.	0.182	0.184	0.153	0.160	0.154	0.160	0.168	0.171
N	283	283	296	296	296	296	579	579

Notes: (1) Entries are parameter estimates from OLS regression with s.e. in parentheses. (2) Like in Verba's model, I also include in the model but do not report the following variables: working, retired, Catholic religious preference, and age dummies (45-54 is the excluded category)

**Table 6: The Effect of the Pilot Measure of Political Interest in Luskin's Model of Political Learning**

	Follow Public Affairs		Interest in Information (5)		Interest in Information (4)		Pooled Political Interest	
	Differentiation	Knowledge	Differentiation	Knowledge	Differentiation	Knowledge	Differentiation	Knowledge
Education	0.210 (0.060)	0.189 (0.059)	0.187 (0.060)	0.164 (0.057)	0.189 (0.060)	0.167 (0.057)	0.201 (0.042)	0.180 (0.041)
Occupation	0.021 (0.034)	-0.006 (0.033)	-0.007 (0.034)	0.058 (0.032)	-0.007 (0.034)	0.058 (0.032)	0.006 (0.024)	0.026 (0.023)
Intelligence	0.291 (0.091)	0.369 (0.091)	0.442 (0.093)	0.538 (0.090)	0.439 (0.093)	0.534 (0.090)	0.367 (0.065)	0.450 (0.064)
Exposure to print media	0.018 (0.035)	0.080 (0.034)	-0.005 (0.035)	0.097 (0.034)	-0.005 (0.035)	0.098 (0.034)	0.005 (0.025)	0.086 (0.024)
Political Interest	0.219 (0.050)	0.296 (0.050)	0.240 (0.066)	0.436 (0.062)	0.182 (0.050)	0.325 (0.047)	0.212 (0.049)	0.265 (0.047)
Political Interest*Module							-0.026 (0.066)	0.075 (0.064)
Constant	0.222 (0.057)	0.050 (0.056)	0.124 (0.065)	-0.212 (0.062)	0.183 (0.059)	-0.102 (0.056)	0.188 (0.048)	0.002 (0.047)
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.257	0.354	0.228	0.419	0.228	0.417	0.245	0.390
S.E. of Reg.	0.248	0.239	0.257	0.236	0.257	0.237	0.252	0.238
N	327	314	335	320	335	320	662	634

Note: Entries are parameter estimates from OLS regression with s.e. in parentheses.

0.42. Comparing the model that includes the new question on interest in information with the one that has the standard question on following public affairs, when both are measured with four categories, the former seems to clearly outperform the latter. The size of the coefficients for political interest is between 0.03 and 0.06 higher, the difference in the predictive power of the model as a whole is remarkable – the adjusted  $R^2$  is 0.24 if one uses the traditional question and 0.35-0.38 if one switches to the proposed item – and the standard error of the regression is reduced from 0.18 to 0.15-0.16.<sup>10</sup> However, the pooled model indicates that the difference between the coefficients for the two measures of political interest is not statistically significant and that much of the increase in the power of the model should be attributed to the changes in the effect of other variables when one controls for interest in information, rather than for following public affairs. For instance, the impact of education and religiosity on overall political participation seems to be absorbed by the existing measure of general interest in politics, but not by the new item on interest in information.

Moving to Luskin's model of political learning, the dependent variable he uses is a compound measure of political sophistication, which employs two measures of integration (i.e. constraint) and one measure of differentiation (i.e. size and range). However, Luskin finds that empirically, this elaborate measure “fares no better than D (differentiation – D.S.)” on its own.<sup>11</sup> Hence, I test the modified model on Luskin's differentiation variable and on a standard scale of political knowledge. Differentiation measures “relatively informed opinions”<sup>12</sup> on a range of political issues. Following Luskin, I counted how many times a respondent was able to place both parties/candidates on an issue and to order them correctly. The scale has 10 components: five issues on which the respondents had to locate the Republicans to the right of the Democrats and Bush to the right of Kerry ( $\alpha=0.84$ ). The issues are: spending on services, defense spending, the role of government in guaranteeing jobs and standard of living, government assistance to Blacks, and preference for diplomacy or the use of military force in solving international problems. The index of political knowledge counts the correct responses to five factual questions: the majority in the House, the majority in the Senate, and the identification of the office held at the time by Cheney, Blair, and Rehnquist ( $\alpha=0.72$ ).

Table 6 presents the results. A comparison of the predictive power of the models suggests yet again that the adapted model does a decent job: in Luskin's analysis the unadjusted  $R^2$  is 0.30, while in the modified version it ranges from 0.24 to 0.43. The key finding from this analysis is that neither measure of political interest is consistently preferable to the other. The item on interest in information has a larger effect on political knowledge, compared to following public affairs, but it performs more poorly in explaining differentiation.<sup>13</sup> The pooled model confirms this interpretation: the coefficient for the interaction of political interest and the module carries a negative sign in one case and a positive sign in the other. In both cases, though, it is not statistically significant even at the 10% level.

---

<sup>10</sup> These results hold also when I control for gender and race and when I run the models without income to gain back 30 respondents who have missing values on this variable.

<sup>11</sup> Robert C. Luskin (1987), “Measuring Political Sophistication”, *American Journal of Political Science* (31:4): 885.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 883.

<sup>13</sup> I obtain the same findings when I add to the models controls for age, gender, and race.

This exercise corroborates the earlier findings: the pilot measure of interest in information about what's going on in politics does not seem to add much to the existing inventory, and to the extent that it does contribute to the explanation of political participation, the difference is not sizable and conflicts with the original expectation.

### Recommendations

The analysis leads to the following conclusions: First, the current NES measure of general interest in politics seems to perform well. Nonetheless, it might be worth considering adding a category at the top to produce better differentiation, without doing too much damage to continuity. Secondly, the proposed "interest in information" item seems to work even better in accounting for participation, but it is not obvious why. Although more experimentation along these lines might be warranted, the item does not seem worth carrying in its present form. Thirdly, the new questions on closeness of attention to politics and frequency of attention generally seem to be measuring the same things as the existing item on following public affairs, only less well.

Appendix A: Dependent Variables Used in Comparison of Means, Correlations, and Bivariate Regression Analyses

**Interviewer Information Rating:** I take the mean of the interviewer's assessment of "R's general level of information about politics and public affairs" in the pre- and post-election studies, both to increase reliability and to avoid missing values for those who were not interviewed in the post-election survey and/or were not evaluated by the interviewer in one of the waves. Alpha reliability is 0.82.

**Political Knowledge:** A count of the correct responses to five questions about the majority in the House, the majority in the Senate, and identification of the office held at 2004 by Dick Cheney, Tony Blair, and William Rehnquist. Alpha reliability is 0.72.

**Locating Parties'/Candidates' Relative Ideology:** Correctly locating the Republican Party/George Bush as more conservative than the Democratic Party/John Kerry.

**Locating Parties'/Candidates' Relative Issue Positions:** Correctly locating the Republican Party/George Bush to the right of the Democratic Party/John Kerry on the following issues: spending on services, defense spending, the role of government in guaranteeing jobs and standard of living, government assistance to Blacks, and preference for diplomacy or the use of military force in solving international problems. For those who were not interviewed in the 2004 post-election study I take the mean of the responses to 4 of the items, since the question on diplomacy/military force was not asked in the pre-election study. Alpha reliability for the parties' index is 0.77 and for the candidates' index it is 0.67.

**Richness of Party/Candidate Considerations:** The number of mentions of what would make or not make the respondent vote for Bush/Kerry and what the respondent likes/dislikes about the Republican/Democratic Parties. Each scale could have a total of 20 mentions, but after recording it to a 0-1 scale the actual range is 0-0.95 for the parties' considerations and 0-0.75 for the candidates' considerations.

**Turnout in 2000:** "Do you remember for sure whether or not you voted in that election?" (1=voted).

**Turnout in 2004:** Half of the sample in the 2004 NES was randomly selected to receive the standard version ("How about you, did you vote in the elections this November?"), while the other half received the following question: "Which of the following statements best describes you: I did not vote in the election this November; I thought about voting this time - but didn't; I usually vote, but didn't this time; or I am sure I voted?" Those that answered that they voted, in either version, were coded 1; all the rest were coded 0.

**Campaign Activity:** An index of seven items: trying to influence others' vote, going to campaign rallies or speeches, displaying a campaign button or sticker, doing campaign work for one of the parties or candidates, making a contribution to a candidate, to a party, or to any other groups that supports candidates in elections. Alpha reliability is 0.64.

**Other Forms of Political Participation:** An index of four items: contacting a public official to express one's views, taking part in a protest, march, or demonstration, working with others in the community to deal with some problem facing the community, and attending a meeting about an issue in the community or school. Alpha reliability is 0.62.

**Membership in Organizations:** The number of organizations that the respondent is a member of (e.g. labor unions, fraternal groups, hobby clubs, community groups, school groups, groups working on political issues). The highest value (1) indicates that the respondent is a member of 7-12 groups.

**Frequency of Exposure to News in Media:** Index of five items: How many days in the past week did you watch the national network news on TV? Local TV news shows in the late afternoon or early evening? Local TV news shows in the late evening? Read a daily newspaper? And read a daily newspaper online? Alpha reliability is 0.53.

**How Much Attention to News in Media:** Index of three items: How much attention do you pay to the national news? Local news? Newspaper articles? Alpha reliability is 0.57.

**Exposure to News about the Campaign:** Index of four items: Did you read about the campaign in any newspaper? Did you watch any programs about the campaign on television? Did you read about the campaign in any magazines? Did you listen to any speeches or discussions about the campaign on the radio? The first was asked in the pre-election 2004 study and the other three only in the post-election study, hence for those respondents who were not interviewed after the elections the value on the scale is just their answer to the first question. Alpha reliability is 0.47.

**How Much Attention to News about the Campaign:** “In general, how much attention did you pay to news about the campaign for President?” (1=a great deal).

**Whether R Ever Discusses Politics:** “Do you ever discuss politics with your family or friends?” (1=yes).

**Frequency of Discussion of Politics:** “How many days in the past week did you talk about politics with family or friends?” (1=seven days).

**Caring Who Wins the House:** “How much would you say that you personally care about the way the election to the U.S. House of Representatives comes out?” (1=very much)

**Caring Who Wins the Presidency:** “Generally speaking, would you say that you personally care a good deal who wins the presidential election this fall, or that you don’t care very much who wins?” (1=cares a good deal).

#### Appendix B: The Variables in the Modified Verba et al. Model of Political Participation

**Activity-Verba and Activity-Full** (the dependent variables): Described in the text.

**Education:** Six categories: up to 11 years (there are only 8 respondents with 1-8 years of education), high school diploma, more than 12 years but no degree, junior/community level degree, BA, and more than BA.

**Family Income:** Summary of household income, ranging from none or less than \$2,999 (=0) to \$120,000 and over (=1).

**Job Level:** Verba et al. asked the respondents how much education and on-the-job-training is needed to do a job like the one they do, and based on the responses they created a 5-category variable, with physicians, architects, and attorneys as examples for jobs at the highest level, and dishwashers or cashiers at the lowest level. As a proxy for this variable I use a dummy with executive, administrative, managerial or professional specialty occupations codes as 1 and all other occupations coded as 0.

**Organizational Affiliation:** Verba et al. asked whether the respondents is affiliated with any non-political organization, and coded those who were not affiliated, affiliated, and attended meetings. The available NES measure asks whether one is a “member of any of these kinds of organizations” (1=yes, 0=no), listing “labor unions, associations of people who do the same kinds of work, fraternal groups such as Lions or Kiwanis, hobby clubs or sports teams, groups working on political issues, community groups, and school groups”. Despite the fact that the NES measure

lists also groups that do take political stands, the percentage who are affiliated is 48%, very close to the 54% in Verba's measure.

**Religious Attendance:** Attends a religious service more than once a week, once a week, almost every week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, or never.

**Political Information:** See the scale of political knowledge in appendix A.

**Political Efficacy:** The sum of the answers to the following two questions: "public officials don't care what people like me think." Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement?"; and "people like me don't have any say about what the government does." Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with this statement?" Alpha reliability is 0.70. Verba et al. constructed a similar scale based on two comparable items that were asked with reference to both local and national government.

**Partisan Strength:** Strong Democrats or Republicans, Weak Democrats or Republicans, Leaning Democrats or Republicans, and Independents/apolitical/other minor party.

### Appendix C: The Variables in the Modified Luskin Model of Political Learning

**Differentiation and Political Knowledge** (the dependent variables): described in the text.

**Education:** see above, appendix B.

**Occupation:** Luskin used the 3-digit census occupation code to classify the respondents into a dichotomous variable that distinguishes between "more and less politically impinged occupations". Since this 3-digit variable is missing from the 2004 ANES to preserve respondent confidentiality, I used as a proxy a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 for people with executive, administrative, managerial, or professional specialty occupations (codes 001-199) and 0 for all the rest. This leads to a considerable, albeit imperfect, overlap with Luskin's classification.

**Intelligence:** I follow Luskin in using the interviewer's rating, at the end of the ANES interviews, of the respondent's "apparent intelligence" as a measure of intelligence. To construct the variable I take the mean of the pre-election interview and the post-election interview rating. This helps to increase reliability (alpha is 0.79) and to substantially reduce the number of missing values.

**Exposure to Print Media:** The respondent's answer to the following question: "How many days in the past week did you read a daily newspaper?" This is very similar to Luskin's measure, which uses the sum of the frequencies with which respondents reads about politics in newspapers and about the campaign in magazines.