

What Ordinary Survey Data Can (and Cannot) Tell us About Partisans' Views of "The Facts"

Gregory Huber

(With Alan Gerber)

Political Science & ISPS, Yale University

Comments for "The Politics of Truth"

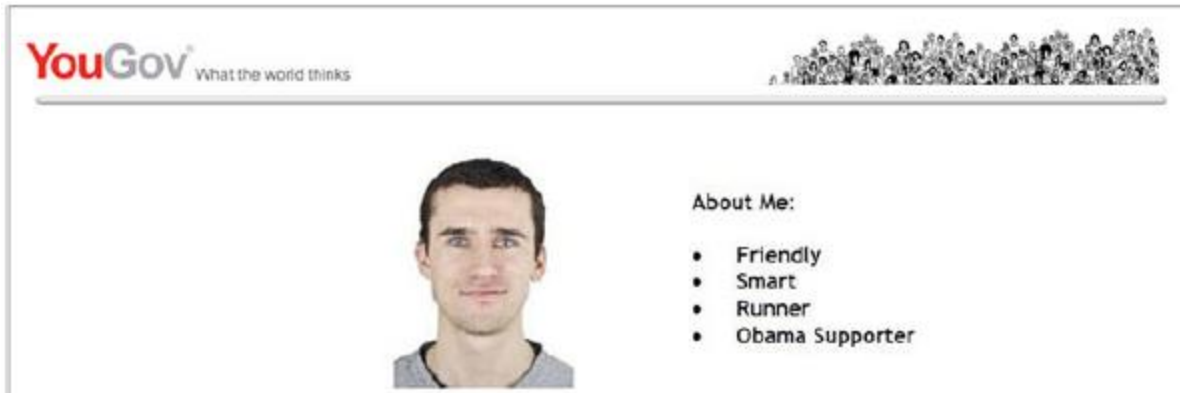
March 2018

Motivations

- Conference Website: “Perceptions of factual reality now come in partisan shades of red and blue, rendering large swaths of the American citizenry stubbornly misinformed...”
 - Sources: (1) Selective exposure or (2) biased processing
- Survey data show Americans differ by party in their assessments of facts like retrospective economic performance
 - Not a new finding (Bartels 2002, retrospective evaluations of economy differ by party during both Reagan and Clinton presidencies)
 - Do we live in separate realities?

Motivations Continued

- Partisanship even appears to contaminate assessments of things like beauty



- This person is rated as more (or less attractive) by partisans depending on who they voted for (Nicholas et al. 2016)

Our Argument: Be skeptical of survey data

- Answers to a survey question can reflect multiple motivations
 - The truth (get it right)—what one really believes
 - Expressiveness—a chance to cheerlead for one's team
 - Overt: Doing it knowingly
 - Implicit: Caused by low attention/engagement
 - Related, displacement: Answering a different question
- A widespread problem in the social sciences, public health, etc.: Survey data are cheap talk

Are survey responses affected by incentives to be accurate?

- (Bullock, Gerber, Hill, and Huber 2015, Study 2)
- Ask 10 factual question about economy, war in Iraq, spending, etc.
 - Example: “From January 2001, when President Bush first took office, to January 2009, when President Bush left office, how had the unemployment rate in the country changed?” (-2 to +4%)
 - Averages: Democrats +2.3, Republicans +1.5, diff = .8
 - (Truth: Increased by 3.6 %)
- Pooling across 10 items, average party gap is .145 (arbitrary scale, for this item gap is .239)

So what happens if I pay you to get it right?

- Randomly select some people to receive \$0.10 to \$1.00 to provide a correct answer
 - It is one thing to bloviate for free, another to do so when it costs you money
- Paying for correct answers reduces partisan gap by 60%
 - But payment won't work if you don't know the answer!
- Solution: Add (OLD) SAT-style penalty for guessing
 - Pay a portion of the correct response for saying "Don't know"
 - About 50% of respondents choose "Don't know" for \$.10, versus \$.50 for a right answer
 - Eliminates 80% of partisan gap
- When paid \$1.00 for a correct answer and \$.33 for a don't know, party gaps entirely disappear!

Implications

- Survey responses are fragile
- People don't know, and they know it
 - (That they don't know might bother us, a lot)
- Advice: Don't treat survey responses any more seriously than survey respondents do
 - (And all those Sanders supporters promised they wouldn't vote for Clinton, and all those Bush supporters said they wouldn't vote for Trump)

Questions

- What would the data look like in 2018?
- Do people who cheerlead more also, underneath, know more or less?
- Is voting (or most politics) expressive or sincere?
 - Does current political environment encourage being expressive?
 - Do people think deeply when voting?
- What do people do when they don't know?
 - What's their best guess?
- Necessary caveat: Technique only works for verifiable facts
 - “Is Obama a Muslim” is not a verifiable fact

Quick: What about the beauty result?

- (Joint with Omer Yair, Stony Brook, in progress)
- Problem: No “objective” beauty measurement
- Alternative techniques: “Blow off steam” and “Warn”
 - Before asking how attractive someone is, either ask them whether the person has good values, or let them know they will have a chance to answer that question
- **PRELIMINARY** results: Partisan beauty gaps decline by 48% compared to just asking beauty

Thank you