



Question-Wording Effect: Bias or Conceptual Difference?

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Question-wording Effect

- Word choice
- Balance
- Response options

Bias or Not

- Data collection for facts has a “truth”
 - Question-wording effect is a bias moves responses from truth
- Opinions may not have a firm truth
 - Opinion on policy may be “support if certain conditions are met”
 - Question-wording effect may change the conceptual frame that respondents are using to answer the question.

The Messy Reality

- On policy matters
 - Some people are passionate
 - Some people are knowledgeable
 - Most people are neither
- Surveying on policy
 - Opinions of those who care the most
 - Opinions of those who understand the issue
 - Opinions of those who have never formed an opinion until we ask

Polls on Policy

- The goal of most opinion researchers in the policy realm is to take a snapshot of the public's opinion at this particular time.
- Partisan pollsters seek to show how many people support their position.
- Media polls try to capture the public's opinion using the terms of the current debate.
- Some unaffiliated polls strive to determine the unbiased opinion.

Recent examples

- **Do you think the policies of the Obama administration on domestic oil drilling and the president's refusal to build the Keystone pipeline are responsible for the increase in gas prices?**
 - **40% yes**
 - **52% no**
- **From what you know and have read, do think the U.S. government should or should not approve the building of this pipeline? (Gallup)**
 - **57% approve**
 - **29% not approve**
- **Supporters of the proposed Keystone oil pipeline say it will ease America's dependence on Mideast oil and create jobs. Opponents fear the environmental impact of building a pipeline. What about you, do you support or oppose building the Keystone oil pipeline? (Quinnipiac)**
 - **64% Support**
 - **23% Oppose**

Word Choice

- Rugg (1941)
 - Do you think that the United States should forbid public speeches against democracy?
 - Forbid – 54%
 - Do you think that the United States should allow public speeches against democracy?
 - Not Allow – 75%
- Schuman & Presser (1981)
 - Forbid – 21%
 - Not allow – 48%

Immigration Policy: “Amnesty”

- Thinking about immigrants who are currently living in the US illegally...Do you favor or oppose **providing amnesty to illegal immigrants** currently in the country if they pass background checks, pay fines, and have jobs?
 - 50% Support
 - 42% Oppose
- Thinking about immigrants who are currently living in the US illegally...Do you favor or oppose **providing a way for illegal immigrants** currently in the country **to gain legal citizenship** if they pass background checks, pay fines, and have jobs?
 - 58% Support
 - 35% Oppose
- Source: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Communications Survey, Dec, 2007

DUAL RESPONSE OPTION

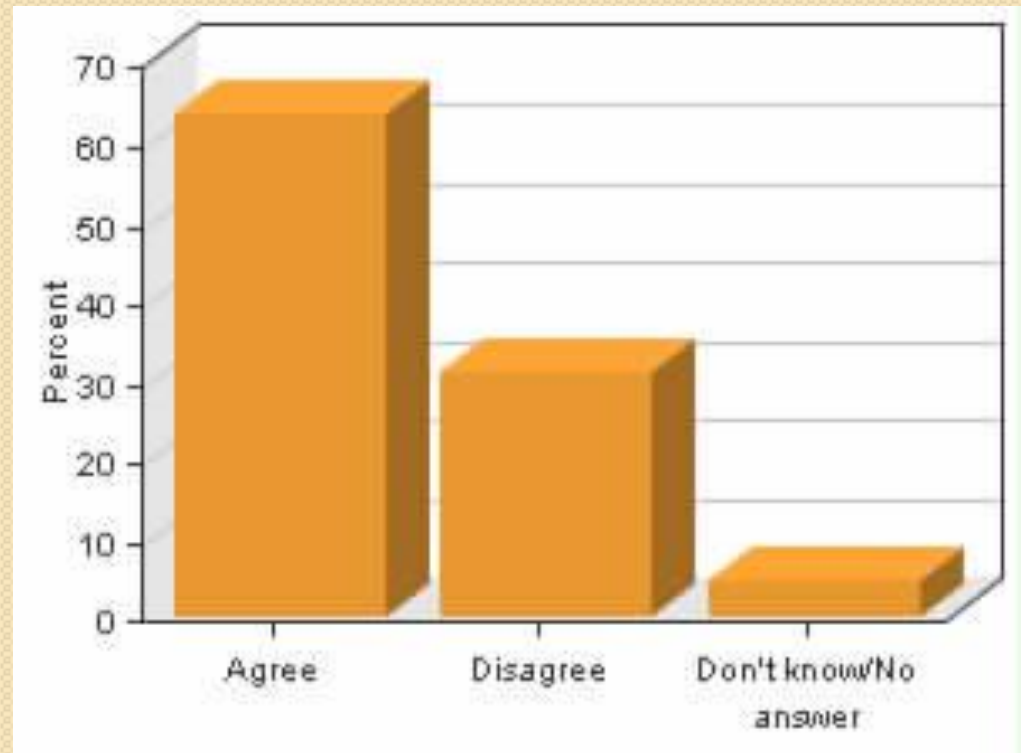
In general, do you agree or disagree with the 1973 Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision that established a woman's right to an abortion?

64% -- Agree

31% -- Disagree

5% -- Don't know

(Quinnipiac)



MULTIPLE OPTION – SAME POLL

Do you think abortion should be legal in all cases, legal in most cases, illegal in most cases or illegal in all cases?

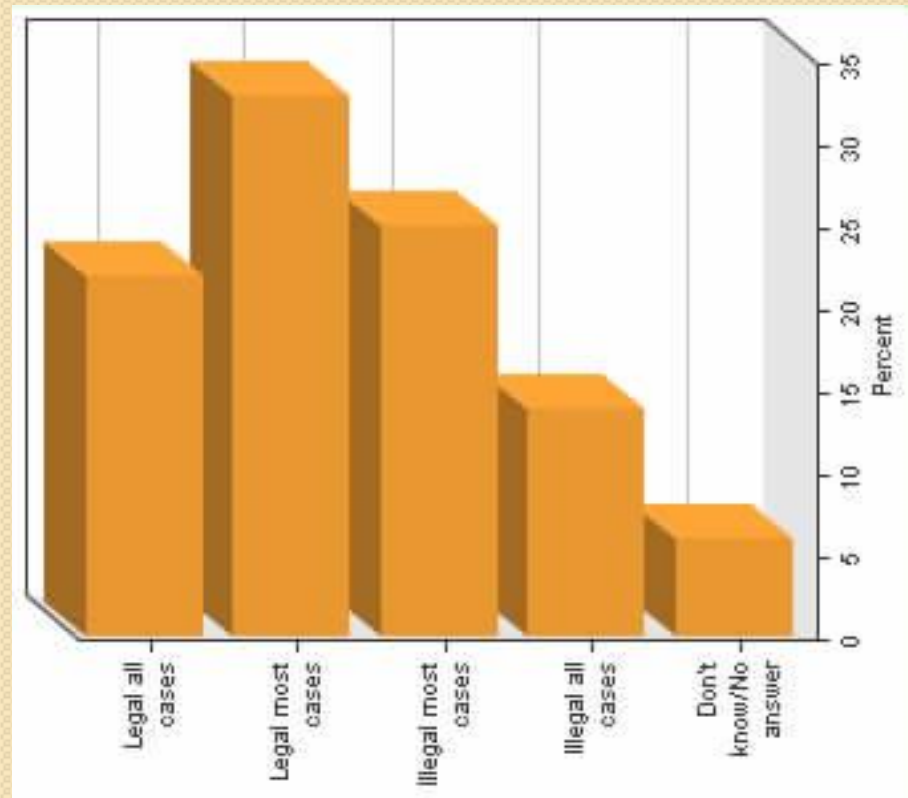
22% -- Legal all cases

33% -- Legal most cases

25% -- Illegal most cases

14% -- Illegal all cases

6% -- Don't know/No answer



General Social Survey

Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion	%
If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?	75
If she is married and does not want any more children?	48
If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?	87
If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?	46
If she became pregnant as a result of rape?	80
If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?	43
The woman wants it for any reason?	44
Under no circumstances	9

Three Polls in the Same Month

- Do you favor or oppose deporting all illegal immigrants back to their home countries?
 - 47% favor; 49% oppose
- If you had to make a choice, would you favor deporting immigrants in America who are not legal citizens and do not have work permits, or would you favor allowing these immigrants to stay in America as long as they pass a security check, meet certain conditions and pay taxes?
 - 35% deport, 61% allow to stay

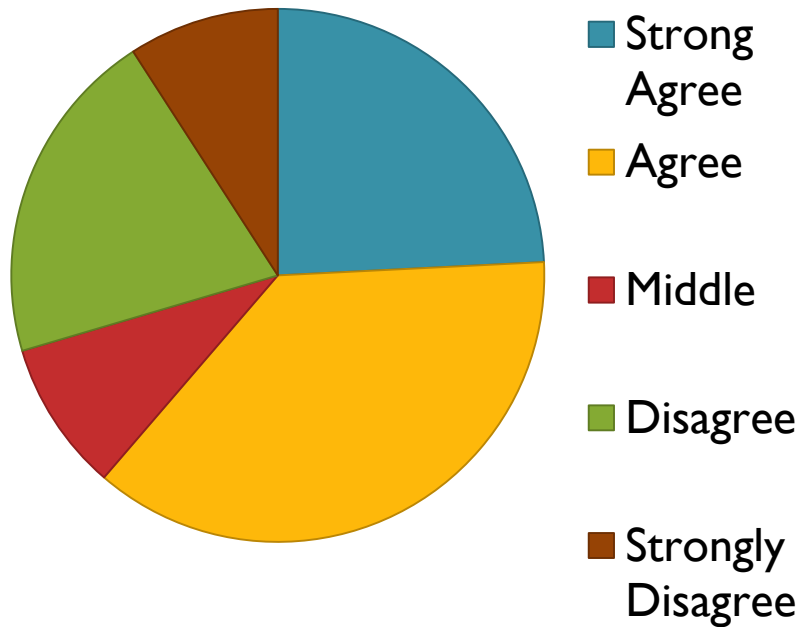
Third Poll

- Should the government--deport all illegal immigrants back to their home country, allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States in order to work, but only for a limited amount of time, or allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States and become US citizens, but only if they meet certain requirements over a period of time?
 - 18% - Deport all illegal immigrants
 - 17% - All illegal immigrants to remain a limited amount
 - 63% - Remain in U.S. to become citizens

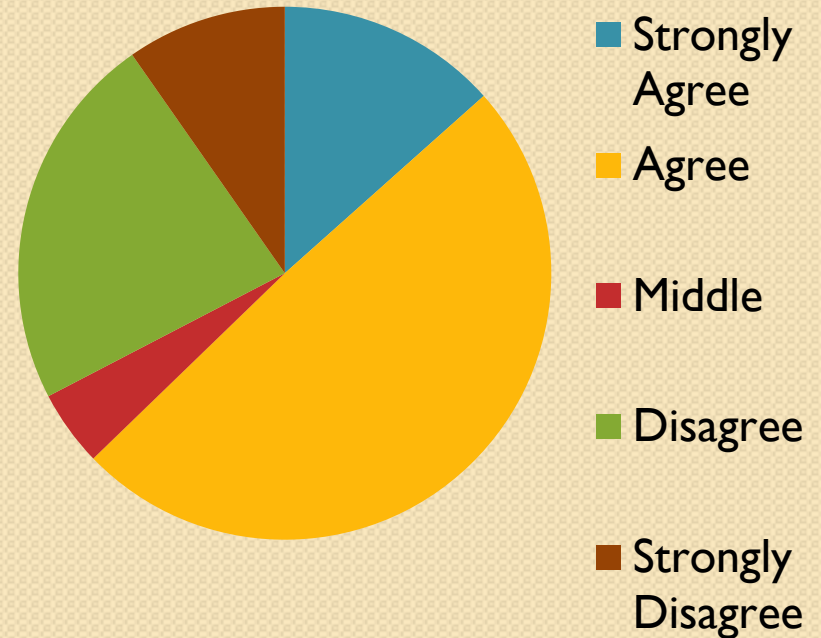
Unauthorized immigrants should be arrested and put into jail to deter others from entering the country illegally

Anyone who wants to be a United States citizen should be allowed to come to the United States

Arrest Illegals



Allowed to Come

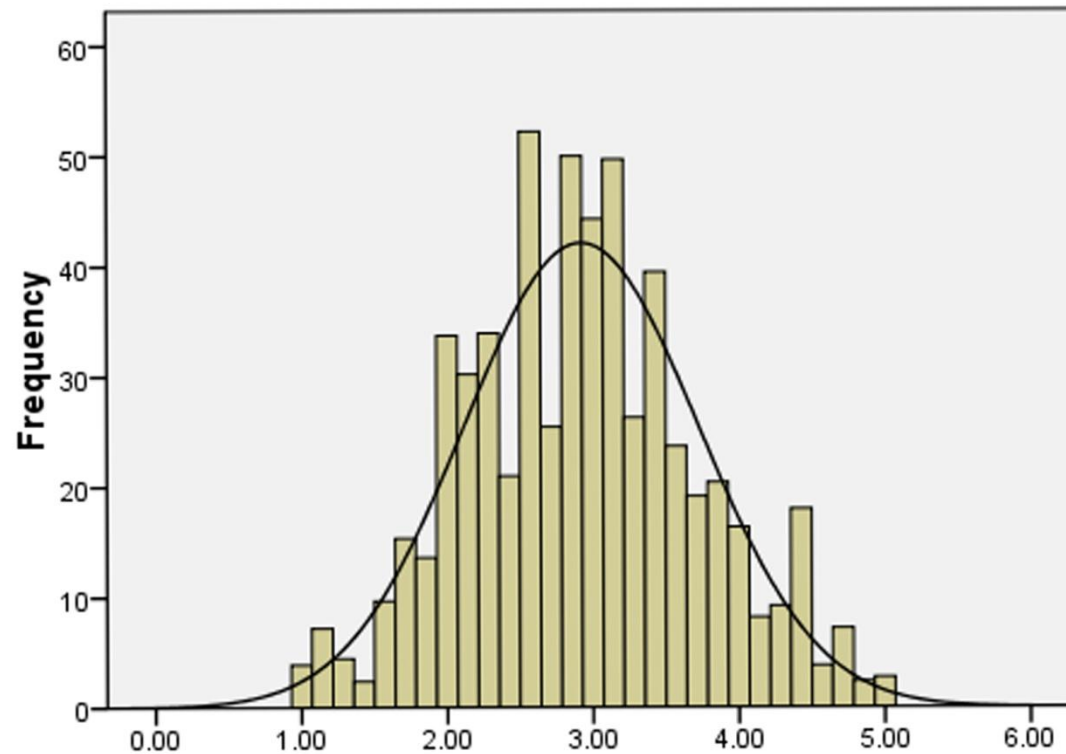


Comparing Extreme Viewpoints

Series of Questions With Various Policy Options


- All unauthorized immigrants should be deported immediately.
- Unauthorized immigrants should have no access to government services including health facilities
- Unauthorized immigrants working in the US should never be allowed to become citizens.
- There should be procedures such as fees and background checks that will allow the best unauthorized immigrants to become authorized.
- Unauthorized immigrants who have jobs should be able to become citizens if they want to.


Scale Distribution



Findings

- The majority of the public do not have fully formed opinions on policy
 - They lack the passion and/or the knowledge
- Survey respondents without strong convictions take cues from question-wording and response options
- Differences due to wording choice are enlightening

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- Most policy polls try to put public in dual option when opinion is more complex and dynamic.
 - Like many social science phenomenon, opinions should be thought of as a normal distribution.
 - Differences between wording choices indicate measurement on a different point on continuum of opinion.

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- “Very biased” questions can define the extremes of the opinions of the most passionate.
 - A series of questions can determine where the “median of opinion” lies. What conditions moves the majority from support to oppose.

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