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Does explicit instruction to answer quickly speed up respondents in web surveys?

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ABSTRACT

We tested if explicit instruction to answer quickly speed up respondents in web surveys. In sum, it does not appear so. We used a Wilson–Patterson style battery of ideology that was originally designed for quick responses to brief issue positions. Fielded in the US and India through Amazon's Mechanical Turk and in Hungary during a lab experiment, there is no significant difference in response time when having extra instructions asking people to respond quickly.

Background and data

The Wilson–Patterson battery is a multi-dimensional test of ideology, initially designed in 1968 (Wilson & Patterson, 1968). Since its conception, multiple incarnations of the test, with varying number of items, were used in studies measuring ideology by both psychologists and political scientists, updating its items (e.g., Alford, Funk, & Hibbing, 2005; Littvay, 2012; Oxley, Smith, Alford, Hibbing, Miller, Scalora et al., 2008). The original battery is a simple list of 50 issue positions with trichotomous response options where the respondent needs to select, yes, no or "if absolutely uncertain", the question mark in the middle. Original authors' intentions on how the respondents should answer the battery are quite clear. "There are no right or wrong answers; do not discuss; just give your first reaction. Answer all items" (Wilson & Patterson, 1968, p. 266). "Discussion" or any mental elaboration could increase a person's uncertainty about how they should answer and would make the questionnaire take longer.

Critics of the Wilson–Patterson style measures of ideology often note that so many items simply take too long to answer as compared to one or a handful of unidimensional single-item ideology questions such as liberal–conservative or left–right. In this note we present more information on how long a contemporary online administered Wilson–Patterson

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style battery takes to answer. In addition, we tested whether giving participants the instruction not to think too much about their answer would speed up the process.

We conducted an experiment in English over Amazon Mechanical Turk in the US and India (e.g., Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012) and in the local language in Hungary in a lab experiment where participants were recruited through a student work agency. Among other tasks participants were given a 49-item Wilson–Patterson style battery. These 49-items were developed by CEU's Political Behavior Research Group (PolBeRG) for cross-culturally valid measurement of ideology. This round of data collection was the first in a multi-step effort to develop a cross-cultural Wilson-Patterson-like battery. While the battery development is still ongoing we are ready to report the findings from the instruction experiment. Instructions for the battery were randomized where one group received the following simple instruction:

> *"In this survey, we will ask you to evaluate whether you approve*  *or disapprove*  *of some items, or you are not sure*  *."*

The other group, in addition, received the following instruction:

> *Do not think too much about the answer. Your first impression is the best answer. If no answer comes to mind immediately, choose*  *.*

Results

The additional instruction did not have a statistically significant effect in any of the three samples, although the differences were in the expected direction in the US and Hungarian samples. Results are reported in Table 1. In the Hungarian case results approach statistical significance, but not in the other two.

Table 1. Time to answer the 49-item battery with and without additional instructions not to think too much about the answer in three countries (seconds)

	Mean	SD	n	t	p
India – no add. instr.	158.92	88.48	140		
India – add. instr.	171.75	83.34	167		
India – difference	12.83			-1.301	.194
US – no add. instr.	136.83	57.67	146		
US – add. instr.	130.34	46.56	154		
US – difference	-6.49			1.069	.285
Hungary – no add. instr.	206.94	72.42	99		
Hungary – add. instr.	190.09	69.44	100		
Hungary – difference	-16.85			1.675	.095

***Comment*: In India two respondents were removed because they were considered outliers in terms of time use.**

Based on this inconclusive single-case study, it appears that respondents in online surveys already use strategies that decrease cognitive complexity and increase response speed without being explicitly instructed to do so. We found no significant difference between the two conditions when it comes to the time it takes to complete the 49-item battery. Unfortunately the test is quite underpowered to assess data quality differences. Direction of difference went in inconsistent directions across the various country samples. While this example is specific to a Wilson–Patterson style battery, our findings might generalize to other questionnaires where respondents are instructed to report quick, gut-level responses. On the other hand, scales that require deeper thought about the questions may benefit from explicit instructions that the respondent should effortfully elaborate before providing their answer.

References

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