

# Improving the Measurement of Political Participation

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Despite the ostensibly objective nature of most acts of political participation, the phenomenon of civic engagement has proven difficult to measure at the individual level. Political acts are infrequent, somewhat cyclical, socially desirable, and of low salience. Consequently, survey-based measures are plagued with memory problems, social desirability bias, biases related to the timing of the survey, and sometimes even a failure to achieve a shared understanding of the acts being asked about.

As part of a two year project to develop a new and more reliable survey-based index of civic engagement among young people, we have conducted a number of experiments with the goal of improving the measurement of political participation. This paper presents the results of several of these experiments, including those which test for question wording effects to discern social desirability and possible ambiguity in question meaning, test-retest checks for reliability, and the inclusion of new, potentially useful measures of engagement in order to ensure content validity.<sup>1</sup>

### **The nature of the problem**

Illustrative of one of the difficulties in measuring participation is the 13 percentage point difference in the reported rate of voluntarism between the 2000 NES and the 1998 Independent Sector survey, both derived from national samples of those 18 and older. The NES version normalizes inactivity in an effort to reduce the pressure to report a socially desirable behavior, though its definition of volunteering is much less restrictive than the Independent Sector survey. The Independent Sector survey provides an exhaustive list of volunteer possibilities, which may remind respondents of a past behavior that would otherwise have gone unrecognized as legitimate charitable work. The 13 point difference produced by the two questions is not enormous, but is large enough to suggest that even the measurement of concrete behaviors is subject to significant error.

Voluntarism is not the only behavior we believe to be ripe for methodological critique. Our understanding of how much political and social activism exists in the U.S. today is informed from a perspective which assumes people recall and report their activities truthfully to survey researchers. Activities which are both system-directed, such as voting and registration, and informal, such as protesting or volunteering, are measured largely through surveys that rely on

Many people say they have less time these days to do volunteer work. What about you, were you able to devote any time to volunteer work in the last 12 months or did you not do so?

Yes: 43%

(From 2000 National Election Survey)

Listed on this card are examples of the many different areas in which people do volunteer activity. By volunteer activity I mean not just belonging to a service organization, but actually working in some way to help others for no monetary pay. In which, if any, of the areas listed on this card have you done some volunteer work in the past 12 months?

56% reported rate of voluntarism

(From 1998 Independent Sector survey)

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<sup>1</sup>Our larger study is comprised of three phases. The first entailed a series of expert panels and focus groups with citizens to probe the meaning of civic engagement. These helped us to assure content validity in our measures. The second included the survey experiments reported here. A third phase, now underway, entails a large national survey which puts into practice what we have learned.

the accuracy of respondent self-reports.<sup>2</sup> While a substantial body of literature exists which tests the veracity of self-reported voting (Abelson, Loftus and Greenwald, 1992; Hill and Hurley, 1984; Presser, 1990; Sigelman, 1982; Silver, Anderson and Abramson, 1986; Traugott and Katosh, 1979; Belli, Traugott and Rosenstone, 1994) and registration claims (Traugott and Katosh, 1979; Katosh and Traugott, 1981), little has been done to examine the accuracy of our understanding of aggregate levels of other forms of political and social activism.

We raise the possibility that in addition to voting and registration, there are other types of political and quasi-political behavior (i.e., media use, attentiveness to politics, etc.) that may be clouded by methodological weaknesses. We test whether similar findings emerge when the same substantive question is asked in different ways, and whether respondents are able to give the same answer to the same question at different points in time. Our experimental research stems from a belief that responses to some indicators are plagued by social desirability bias and complicated by the sporadic nature of much political activism (Brady, 1999). Thus, using experimental data from Virginia and New Jersey, the only two states with gubernatorial elections in 2001, as well as an Internet based probability sample of 15 to 25 year-olds, we will examine the extent to which our understanding of some common forms of political and quasi-political behavior are compromised by methodological shortcomings.

We also briefly address content validity, or the extent to which political participation is measured by an adequate array of appropriate indicators. One dimension missing from most measures of political participation is consumer activism, or the practice of buying or not buying products in order to send a message to the producer in response to hearing something in the news or through word of mouth. Preliminary research has shown it is practiced by a surprisingly large number of people. Heldman (2001), for instance, found that a majority of New Jersey residents had avoided buying products due to safety or environmental concerns or not bought a product because of personal distaste for the company responsible for its production at some point in their lives.

### **Previous Research**

Voting, and to a lesser extent, registration, have been the subject of numerous empirical examinations into inconsistencies between self-reported and actual behavior. In particular, research has attempted to uncover the reasons behind the repeated finding that sizable proportions of survey respondents report voting when they did not. Underlying much of this research is the sporadic nature of political behavior and the role of memory confusion (See, for instance, Abelson et al., 1992 and Belli et al., 1999). Telescoping, or the phenomenon of basing one's inaccurate "yes" response on a more remote voting experience, is thought to lessen the accuracy of findings that rely on self-reported claims of voting. Research that both validates voting claims and asks the same question at different points in time has found overreporting increases the farther away the question is asked from the target election. However, as Belli and his colleagues point out, "if episodic memory alone was involved, one would expect both under and overreporting to occur equally often" (Belli et al., 2001; 480).

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, we know how many people register and vote, but cannot perform individual level analysis with these data.

Source monitoring errors have been offered as another memory-related issue that compromises the accuracy of self-reported voting claims (Belli et al. 1994 and 1999). This line of thought attributes overreporting to a respondent confusing past voting experiences (or merely thinking about voting and whom to vote for) with actually voting in the most recent election. In short, some respondents may be simply unable to identify the source of the memory, causing them to confuse real participation with past thoughts or behavior.

While memory confusion implies an inability to distinguish a truthful from nontruthful response, social desirability bias leads either to respondents knowingly and falsely reporting voting out of a desire to appear a good citizen, or to memory errors regarding behaviors the respondent intends or desires to do (Presser 1990; Belli et al. 1999).

While scant research similar to that concerning voting has been done using other behavioral indicators of civic and political engagement, valuable insights can guide our thinking about how many of the same issues may complicate the reliable and valid measurement of related activities. Social desirability bias may affect reports of voluntarism. When faced with a question about unpaid work to help others, many may find it difficult to say they do not. A “yes” response, however untruthful, satisfies the respondent’s need to appear virtuous to the interviewer.

Concerns arise also from the sporadic nature of activity such as protesting or contacting elected officials. While it is perhaps easier for a respondent to recollect if he or she has ever done such things, it is more difficult to remember when the last contact was made or last protest event attended. Because these kinds of activities are not centered on a regularly scheduled event, such as an election, memory confusion may make it difficult to answer questions about sporadic activity. Furthermore, most of our knowledge of sporadic activism is informed from answers based on questions which locate the behavior in a certain time period, such as those beginning with “In the past twelve months...” As a result, our understanding of some informal activism may be clouded by memory confusion.

One issue not addressed in this paper, though very much on our minds, is the multidimensional nature of political participation. Verba and Nie’s (1967) pathbreaking work found that different American citizens could be highly engaged in entirely different political acts -- that activities most political scientists would agree constitute political engagement may be only weakly correlated with each other. Traditional efforts at the development of indexes seek to identify and refine items that are correlated with the underlying construct; in the case of civic and political engagement, we have to be aware of the possible existence of multiple, independent underlying constructs.

### **Data and measures**

This analysis is part of a larger project funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts to develop reliable and valid measures of youth civic engagement. Our data collection included two panels of experts and activists who work with young people, 12 focus groups with a range of age groups across the country, statewide telephone surveys around the 2001 elections in New Jersey and Virginia (including panel surveys in both states), a national survey of youth aged 15-25 conducted by Knowledge Networks, and two pilot surveys with national samples of 100.

Our data are drawn from the following surveys: The New Jersey panel survey was conducted before and after the gubernatorial election in the fall of 2001. The pre-election survey

(hereafter referred to as NJ Pre) was conducted using random digit dialing to select a sample of those 18 years of age and older. 895 respondents were interviewed, with a response rate of 66.8 percent. Interviewing for the NJ Pre began September 22, 2001 and ended September 26, 2001. The post-election survey (hereafter referred to as NJ Post) re-interviewed 528 of those originally contacted in the NJ Pre. This resulted in a 59.0 panel response rate. Interviewing for the NJ Post began November 12, 2001 and was completed November 20, 2001. The New Jersey panel survey was conducted by the New York based market research firm of Schulman, Ronca, and Bucavalas, Inc.

The Virginia panel survey was conducted before and after the gubernatorial election in the fall of 2001. The pre-election component (hereafter referred to as VA Pre) was conducted using random digit dialing to select a sample of 600 respondents 18 years of age and older. Interviewing for the VA Pre began October 4, 2001 and was completed October 9, 2001. A total of 263 respondents were re-interviewed for the post-election component (hereafter referred to as VA Post), resulting in a panel response rate of 43.8 percent.

The last data set we employ in our analysis is an Internet based survey of 15 to 25 year-olds conducted by California based Knowledge Networks. Between January 29, 2002 and February 25, 2002, 1166 members of the Knowledge Networks panel who met the age requirements for inclusion in our study completed an on-line questionnaire.<sup>3</sup> The total response rate was 64.8 percent. Our sample was stratified by education, with one group consisting of those currently enrolled in high school, a second group comprised of college graduates and those with some history of college attendance, and a final group of individuals who did not meet the criteria for inclusion in the two previous groups.

We subjected a variety of behaviors broadly construed to be political to a series of experiments designed to ferret out the possible influence of social desirability bias and question ambiguity as well as the episodic nature of certain behavior. Experiments that test for social desirability and question ambiguity do so through the manipulation of question wording and include behaviors such as registration, regularity of voting, contacting elected officials, voluntarism, frequency of political discussions, and group affiliation. Behaviors subjected to test-retest reliability checks in order to assess the degree of response consistency include regularity of voting, history of voting in the 2000 election, contacting elected officials, voluntarism, protest participation, discussing politics, political knowledge, media use, and interpersonal trust. Finally, we explore content validity through use of questions designed to measure the potential importance of consumer activism for measures of political participation.

### **Social desirability**

Since political participation continues to be valued by society, there is the danger that it will be overreported in surveys. A significant body of research indicates that social desirability bias can be lessened by questions that normalize non-participatory behavior or provide respondents opportunities to mention participatory behaviors, even if not the specific behavior

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<sup>3</sup> Knowledge Networks selects panel members using random digit dialing procedures. Respondents are invited to be panel participants and selected households are provided with free hardware and Internet access. This allows surveys to be administered using a Web browser.

under study. Since a key focus of our work is youth and civic engagement, we were especially sensitive to the fact that younger cohorts are more mobile, presenting difficulties in registering to vote. The following are the experimental and control questions used to measure regularity of voting and registration in New Jersey and Virginia:

#### NJ Pre and NJ Post - Regularity of Voting

- Control: Can you tell me how often you vote in local and/or national elections?
- Experimental: We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and/or national election?

#### NJ Pre - Registration

- Control: Are you currently registered to vote?
- Experimental: In talking to people, we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around often. Are you currently registered to vote at the address where you now live?

#### VA Pre – Registration

- Control: In talking to people we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around often. Are you now registered to vote in your precinct or election district, or not?
- Experimental: In talking to people we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around often. Would official state records show that you are now registered to vote in your precinct or election district, or not?

First, despite accounting for the increased mobility of the population and the role frequent moving may play in making registration more difficult, Table 1 shows that changes in question wording does not affect significantly the response distributions between the control and experimental groups. Among younger respondents, fewer indicated being registered when asked the normalizing question, but the differences between forms are not statistically significant. The experiment in Virginia tested whether the implied threat of verification (via a reference to “official state records”) would dampen reported registration rates. Contrary to the expectation, respondents who received the “records” version reported a higher percentage of registration, though again the differences were not statistically significant.

**\*\*\*Table 1 about here\*\*\***

Turning to regularity of voting, our intention was to lessen any social desirability bias by normalizing those who do not consistently turn out on election day. Here, our results were more consistent with expectations, with differences in the predicted direction reaching conventional levels of statistical significance in the pre-election New Jersey survey.<sup>4</sup> Thus, prefacing a question with something along of lines of “We know that most people don't vote in all

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<sup>4</sup> This result was confirmed in another pre-election cross-sectional survey.

elections...” appears to make a difference in how respondents answer. However, the form of the question makes less of a difference after the election, perhaps because of the actual closeness of the behavior under question.

\*\*\*Table 2 about here\*\*\*

Questions about contacts with both federal and state elected officials were subjected to the 12 month-versus-ever variation.

VA Post - Contacting elected officials

- 12 months: In the past **12 months**, have you initiated any contacts with a *federal elected official* or someone on the staff of such an official? I mean someone in the White House or a congressional or senate office?

How about an elected official on the *state or local level* – In the past **12 months**, have you initiated any contacts with a governor or mayor, or a member of the state legislature, or a city or town council – or someone one

- Ever: Have you **ever** initiated any contacts with a *federal elected official* or someone on the staff of such an official. I mean someone in the White House or a congressional or senate office?  
[If yes] And in the past 12 months, have you initiated any contacts with a federal elected official or someone on the staff of such an official? I mean someone in the White House or a congressional or senate office?

How about an elected official on the *state or local level* – a governor or mayor, or a member of the state legislature, or a city or town council – or someone on the staff of such an elected official? Have you **ever** initiated any contacts with an elected official on the state or local level? And have you done so in the past 12 months?

But here the hypothesized social desirability of contacting is debatable. Citizens might feel a need to express their opinion, but much contacting entails highly individualized motivation, such as asking for help with a zoning variance, or problems with a Social Security check.

Accordingly, it’s not clear that respondents would feel any need to say that they had engaged in this behavior. Furthermore, since only approximately one in five respondents report contacting behavior, it is questionable whether social desirability would be at play when the social norm is - perhaps -- to **not** be participatory. And indeed, our VA Post experiment shows no difference in the reported 12-month contacting rate between those asked an “ever” question first and those who were simply asked about the past twelve months (see Table 3).

\*\*\*Table 3 about here\*\*\*

**Volunteering**

We approached voluntarism with two methodological concerns in mind. Volunteering is a socially desirable behavior and may be susceptible to the same types of question manipulation used with registration and voting. Second, we wonder about the shared meaning of voluntarism. Our suspicion stems from both previous quantitative work showing differences in the extent of voluntary activity, depending on how the question is asked, and qualitative work that revealed considerable confusion about the concept. The 13 percentage point difference between the NES and Independent Sector surveys -- one of which defined voluntarism while the other did not -- provides one example. Additionally, our focus group work suggests voluntary activity may mean different things to different people. When we asked respondents to describe what kind of charitable work they have undertaken, some gave answers consistent with altruistic behavior, but a good number also described activities that can only be described as selfishly motivated and inconsistent with the implied meaning of charitable work. For example, a young man in Chicago said his voluntarism consisted of cleaning an elderly man's garage in order to curry favor with a teacher who was about to give him a less than stellar grade. He concluded his activism was futile, since in the end he received a poor grade. While the distinctions in our focus groups between altruistic and selfish definitions of voluntary activity were largely age related, with older participants more likely to report altruistic motivations and behavior, our findings suggest this is an area worth exploring in quantitative research through question wording experiments.

To deal with social desirability bias, we experimented with the "ever" versus "past 12 months" frame for questions in the New Jersey and Virginia surveys. The NJ Pre found differences in overall incidence (yes to any of the three areas of volunteering, including civic or community organizations, educational groups, and political organizations or candidates for office) and in the specific area of civic organizations, but neither difference reached the conventional .05 level of statistical significance (Table 4a). But, in general, this particular effort to account for social desirability bias makes little difference in the proportion who report engaging in volunteer activity.

#### New Jersey - Voluntarism - Pre-Election

- 12 months: Have you volunteered time in the last 12 months to work without pay for (a civic or community organization, or a group providing social services; a group involved in education; a political organization or candidates for office)?
- Ever: Have you ever volunteered time to work without pay for (a civic or community organization or a group providing social services; a group involved in education; a political organization or candidates for office)?  
[If yes] Was this in the last 12 months?

Similarly, Table 4b, which reflects our voluntarism experiments in the Virginia panel survey, shows that clarifying or limiting the meaning of voluntary activity made no significant difference in the reported incidence of behavior (though the more limited version had slightly higher test-retest reliability).

#### Virginia - Voluntarism - Pre- and Post-Election



- Control: Thinking about the last 12 months, have you spent time participating in any voluntary activity, or haven't you had time to do this?
- Experimental: By voluntary activity, I mean not just belonging to a service organization, but actually working in some way to help others for no monetary pay. Thinking about the last 12 months, have you spent time participating in any voluntary activity, or haven't you had time to do this?

**\*Table 4a and 4b about here\*\*\***

### **Discussion of politics and current events**

A common dimension of political engagement is political discussion. The results of one of our NJ Pre experiments point to the need for conceptual clarity in what is to be measured. The control version of the question asked about discussing *politics and government*, while the experimental asked about discussion of *current events and items in the news*.

New Jersey - Discussing politics - Pre-Election

- Control: How often do you talk about politics or government with your family or friends: very often, sometimes, rarely or never?
- Experimental: How often do you talk about current events or things you have heard about in the news with your family or friends: very often, sometimes, rarely or never?

For many political scientists, these terms may be relatively interchangeable, but as Table 5 shows, the questions have very different meanings to respondents. Frequent discussion of “current events and items in the news” is reported by almost twice as many respondents as discussion of “politics and government.”

**\*\*\*Table 5 about here\*\*\***

### **Group membership.**

Measuring membership and activity in groups has long presented challenges to survey research. As Tocqueville observed long ago, Americans are joiners. The number and range of groups to which citizens in the U.S. belong are large, and affiliation with any particular group may vary from psychological identification with occasional financial support, all the way through regular, intensive personal participation. Considerable research has shown the relevance of organizational affiliation and activity for political participation (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Putnam 2000). Baumgartner and Walker (1988), relying on data from the 1985 NES pilot survey, showed that traditional methods of measuring group membership understated the extent of citizen activity in groups and the potential political relevance of this activity. Their recommended sequence of questions asked about nine different types of organizations “you belong to or have given money to in the past twelve months” (plus one catchall category for any other groups). Within each category, respondents were asked how many groups they were affiliated with, and for each group, the nature of their association (active member, not active, donate money only) and whether the group takes stands on issues or tries to influence

government policy.

This battery produces impressive results but takes a great deal of time to administer. With many other dimensions of civic engagement to measure, a researcher may be unable to afford the time required for this battery. During our extensive pretesting of the national survey, we tested three different approaches, borrowing elements from the Baumgartner-Walker battery. The first experiment administered the Baumgartner-Walker questions to about half of the sample (46 cases). We asked the follow up questions (active membership, political activity of group) about each category of group in which the respondent indicated an affiliation (not about each individual group). The other half of the sample (54 cases) received a single question asking about the number of groups with which the respondent is involved; respondents who indicated affiliation with at least one group were asked a single pair of the follow up questions. The second experiment shortened the introduction, dropped one category (fraternities, lodges, etc.), asked only about membership in any group in the category, and asked the follow up questions in each category. Table 6A shows the text of each version.

**\*\*\*Table 6A about here\*\*\***

Table 6B shows a number of tabulations from the experiments. Given the small samples reported here, these results should be taken as suggestive rather than definitive. First of all, there is relatively little difference in the percentage of respondents indicating that they are involved with at least one group. The single question version (Experiment 1, form B) yielded a smaller percentage reporting membership (65% versus 72% and 76%), but this difference was not statistically significant. (These percentages were, however, lower than the 90% found by Baumgartner and Walker.) The mean number of groups reported was also very similar between Form A and Form B. And the mean number of categories of groups was similar between Experiment 1 Form A and Experiment 2. The percentages reporting active membership, and membership in a politically relevant group were more variable, with Experiment 2 yielding the highest percentage reporting an active membership.

**\*\*\*Table 6B about here\*\*\***

In all three conditions, group membership was positively correlated with an index of political participation based on a lengthy series of items covering a wide range of dimensions. Specific comparisons of correlations among the three conditions are risky, given the sample sizes, but a couple of observations may be useful. First, the single question format (Experiment 1, form B) produces correlations comparable in size to those in the more elaborate version in form A. Second, the correlations for Experiment 2 are slightly lower, though still comparable. In particular, the correlation between participation and the number of different categories of group membership is about as high as in Experiment 1, form A.<sup>5</sup>

These experiments suggest that politically relevant group membership can be measured reasonably well with a very simple question, including two follow ups. Additional texture and detail is provided by asking questions about multiple categories of groups, but for many purposes it is probably not necessary to ask detailed follow up questions about each group. In all three versions of our test, political participation was much higher among individuals who

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<sup>5</sup>Although these correlations bounce around quite a bit, they are comparable to or stronger than those found in the NES pilot data collected by Baumgartner and Walker. This provides us with some assurance regarding the construct validity of the measures.

affiliated with groups, but the correlation between political participation and the *number* of groups reported was no larger than that between participation and a dichotomous variable measuring affiliation.

### **Addressing Content Validity: Measuring Consumer Activism**

Our focus groups and expert panels persuaded us that traditional measures of political and civic engagement have not missed the rise of important new forms of activity, with the possible exception of politically motivated consumer behavior. As Caroline Heldman has pointed out, boycotts and even “buycotts” are nothing new in the U.S., having been an important strategy of political movements for many decades (Heldman, 2001). But this activity has tended to be episodic, aimed at achieving specific political goals often unrelated to the products or services being boycotted, and usually directed and organized by one or more specific entities. Is consumer activism a common or uncommon event in life today?

Our focus groups suggested that people do engage in this type of political activity, but that it is relatively rare. When asked about boycotting or buying products to send a political or social message, only a relatively small number of participants could cite specific instances. These were usually racially motivated boycotts of certain companies or brands by African Americans.

In light of this expectation, we were somewhat surprised to find that 40 to 50 percent of respondents in our Virginia panel survey (depending on the specific question) said that they had ever engaged in this type of activity, and 23 to 27 percent said they had done so in the past 12 months. Table 7 shows the wording of the two questions along with the percentage saying yes to having done so at some point in their lives, both before and after the election. We evaluated the reliability and validity of the items by asking them of the same respondents again after the election, and by following up the pre-election item with an open-ended query asking about the specific activity undertaken (among those who said they had done something in the past 12 months). While neither question is ideal (for our large national survey, we ultimately opted to use a variant of an item developed by Heldman), both attempt to frame the behavior in terms of a political or social motivation.

#### **Consumer Activism - Virginia - Pre- and Post-Election**

- Version A: Sometimes people hear things they don't like about products or companies, such as learning certain brands of clothing have been made by people in sweatshops. In order to register a protest or send a message to the company who makes the product, people will avoid buying that product in the future. How about you? Have you ever avoided buying something in order to register a protest or send a message as a consumer, or haven't you ever done this?
- Version B: We all avoid places to eat or shop where we've received bad service. But have you ever heard something you didn't like about a product, corporation, recording artist or anything else that made you stop buying their product in order to register a protest or try to change their behavior, or haven't you ever done this?

**\*\*\*Table 7 about here\*\*\***

Interestingly, nearly three quarters of those who said yes in response to version A were able to provide an acceptable example of what they had done. For version B, the validation rate was lower (63 percent), though still reasonably high. Ironically, version B contained a larger percentage of responses that were motivated by bad service or shoddy products (25 responses out of the 122 who said they had engaged in the behavior) – a problem we had explicitly tried to avoid by referring to this motivation in the question. Apparently, our effort backfired.

Reliability was reasonably high, as measured by the consistency of responses over two waves of the panel: 77 percent and 79 percent for forms A and B, respectively.

We cannot tell from this pilot work how frequently citizens engage in political activism through their purchasing behavior, nor do we have a clear sense of the motivation for doing so. But it is clear that the activity is not rare, that it is sufficiently salient for respondents to recall and describe what they did, and to provide consistent yes or no responses over a range of several weeks.

**Reliability of the measures**

A respondent's ability to give the same answer to the same question at two different points in time depends, in part, on the saliency of the behavior in question. Given the low salience and episodic nature of many political activities, how easy is it for respondents to retrieve a memory linked to the behavior in question? For some activities, such as voting in the most recent presidential election, we would expect a higher incidence of reliable recall when measured at two points in time since voting requires the conscious choice of the respondent to go the polling place (or request an absentee ballot) and cast a vote. However, other behavior, such as talking about politics or media attentiveness may be dependent on the respondent's mood or state of mind, rather than on an accurate reflection of the respondent's actual behavior. It could also vary across time depending on events of the day.

Similarly, attitudes which are often considered precursors to political behavior may be difficult to capture with the appropriate degree of reliability. In particular, our concern centers on interpersonal trust and the extent to which it is assessed consistently across a relatively short period of time. While others have focused on the ambiguity of question meaning in indicators concerning interpersonal trust, our analysis asks the question of whether measures of trust are meaningful if they vacillate across a relatively short period of time among the same respondents.

Activities with the highest incidence of reliable recall are those involving voting, contacting elected officials, and protest behavior. As Table 8 demonstrates, no fewer than eight out of ten respondents provided the same answer to identical questions about each of these behaviors when asked before and after the gubernatorial election. Except for protest behavior, our experimental manipulations were associated with relatively minor differences in reliability.

**\*\*\*Table 8 about here\*\*\***

However, reliable recall of voluntary activity is considerably lower, and varies to a large degree depending on the nature of the organization and the way the question is asked. While only about six out of ten of those who said (before the election) that they volunteered in the last 12 months for civic or community organizations or educational groups gave a consistent answer in the post-election survey, the proportion increases to eight out of ten for volunteering for political organizations or candidates for office (a much less common behavior). The Virginia

experiment, which did not ask about a specific type of volunteer activity, found a modestly higher reliability for the version of the question that provided a definition of volunteering (79 percent consistent versus 71 percent).

More informal indicators of political engagement were less reliable. Only about 50 percent gave the same answer pre- and post-election to a question about the frequency of political discussions, and around 60 percent gave a consistent answer to how closely they follow the world of government and politics. Of course, both are measures of behavior likely to fluctuate in response to political events such as the election.

Media attentiveness, measured as reading the newspaper and following local and national news, yielded better consistency. Approximately three-quarters of those polled gave consistent answers across both points in time for following the national news and reading the newspaper, and about two-thirds did the same for attentiveness to local news. The difference between local and national news reliability is potentially interesting, considering that citizens often say that local news is more relevant to them. However, it is important to note the unprecedented circumstances surrounding both surveys. The September 11 terrorist attacks dominated public consciousness in both New Jersey and Virginia, and may have contributed to greater -- and more consistent -- attentiveness to national news. As a result, it is possible the reliability of indicators concerning national news and newspaper reading were affected by the circumstances.

We also examined political knowledge to test the stability of correct responses over time. We were interested if those who knew the Republicans controlled the House of Representatives, named the GOP as the more conservative party on the national level, or could identify Warner and Allen as Virginia senators would give the same answers some two months later. In general, it appears as if knowledge is stable, with anywhere from three-fourths to close to 90 percent giving a correct answer (or an incorrect answer) at both points in time.

And finally, responses to interpersonal trust questions yielded relatively high consistency, with close to 80 percent of those polled in New Jersey and Virginia evaluating others with the same degree of trustworthiness both before and after the gubernatorial elections.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, the results of our tests and experiments were somewhat mixed; some provided clear insight, reassuring us about the reliability of traditional measures and directing us toward new ones; for others, the results were less clear.

We found relatively modest results from our manipulations to reduce overreporting due to social desirability. Providing either a preface to normalize nonparticipation, or an opportunity to say that one had “ever” performed a particular activity, tended to reduce the incidence for electoral activity (and to a lesser degree for volunteering) but not for contacting officials. This result suggests that different types of civic and political engagement are viewed as differentially socially desirable. For many types, respondents have no particular need to appear active or virtuous. For others, the approaches tested here may help to minimize overreporting.

Most of the activities we examined displayed an acceptable level of test-retest reliability, with consistent answers provided by 70-90 percent of respondents. This level of consistency is comparable to many well established attitudinal measures and to other behaviors outside of the political domain.

Measuring group membership remains a challenge because of tradeoff between the time

involved in administering lengthy batteries of items and the need to gather important detail about the scope and nature of activities. But our preliminary tests indicate that relatively simple approaches may yield data of acceptable quality in some instances. A single question with two follow ups produced a measure with acceptable construct validity, especially if group membership is one of a battery of political behaviors under examination.

The results of our experiments with items about boycotts and buycotts – even with somewhat problematic questions -- suggest that this is an important political behavior with a relatively high incidence. But, as Heldman (2001) has noted, it has largely been overlooked by political scientists

All in all, our results should be reassuring to researchers trying to measure political participation. Despite concerns about the difficulty of achieving valid and reliable measures, our findings suggest that the phenomena under study are rather robust. The greater challenge is explaining why the gap in political participation between younger and older citizens is widening.

**Table 1: Results from VOTING REGISTRATION question wording experiments**

<b>Registration</b> (percent responding “yes”)					
New Jersey	All	18-24	25-35	36-55	56+
Are you currently registered to vote?	79 (450)	51 (41)	68 (83)	83 (207)	89 (119)
In talking to people, we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around often. Are you currently registered to vote at the address where you now live?	76 (445) <i>ns</i>	44 (39) <i>ns</i>	62 (87) <i>ns</i>	80 (189) <i>ns</i>	90 (130) <i>ns</i>
Virginia	All	18-24	25-35	36-55	56+
In talking to people, we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around often. Would official state records show that you are now registered to vote in your precinct or election district, or not?	86 (297)	68 (22)	84 (63)	87 (122)	90 (81)
In talking to people we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around often. Are you now registered to vote in your precinct or election district, or not?	81 (303) <i>ns</i>	57 (23) <i>ns</i>	70 (59) <i>ns</i>	82 (129) <i>ns</i>	92 (86) <i>ns</i>

**Table 2: Results from REGULARITY OF VOTING question wording experiments**

<b>Regularity of voting</b> (percent who say they “always” vote)					
New Jersey - Pre-election	All	18-24	25-35	36-55	56+
We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and/or national elections?	68 (268)	43 (7)	61 (46)	64 (130)	79 (85)
Can you tell me how often you vote in local and/or national elections?	76 (264) <i>p &lt; .05</i>	67 (15) <i>ns</i>	64 (39) <i>ns</i>	75 (115) <i>ns</i>	83 (95) <i>ns</i>
New Jersey - Post-election					
We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and/or national elections?	58 (271)	30 (20)	46 (55)	56 (119)	77 (75)
Can you tell me how often you vote in local and/or national elections?	65 (257) <i>ns</i>	38 (21) <i>ns</i>	41 (39) <i>ns</i>	69 (129) <i>p &lt; .05</i>	80 (65) <i>ns</i>



**Table 3: Results from CONTACTING ELECTED OFFICIALS  
question wording experiments**

<b>Contacting federal elected officials - Virginia Post-Election</b>	Yes - Contact within last 12 months	No
In the past 12 months, have you initiated any contacts with a <i>federal elected official</i> or someone on the staff of such an official? I mean someone in the White House or a congressional or senate office? Control (N = 297)	18	82
Have you <b>ever</b> initiated any contacts with a <i>federal elected official</i> or someone on the staff of such an official. I mean someone in the White House or a congressional or senate office? [If yes] And in the past 12 months, have you initiated any contacts with a federal elected official or someone on the staff of such an official? I mean someone in the White House or a congressional or senate office? Experimental (N = 303)	17	83
<b>Contacting state and local elected officials - Virginia Post-Election</b>	Yes - Contact within last 12 months	No
How about an elected official on the <i>state or local level</i> – In the past 12 months, have you initiated any contacts with a governor or mayor, or a member of the state legislature, or a city or town council – or someone on the staff of such an elected official? Control (N = 297)	23	76
How about an elected official on the <i>state or local level</i> – a governor or mayor, or a member of the state legislature, or a city or town council – or someone on the staff of such an elected official? Have you <b>ever</b> initiated any contacts with an elected official on the state or local level? And have you done so in the past 12 months? Experimental (N = 303)	21	79

**Table 4a: Results from SOCIAL DESIRABILITY VOLUNTARISM question wording experiments in New Jersey (see methodological note below)**

<b>Voluntarism - New Jersey Pre-Election</b>	<b>Yes - Activity within the last 12 months</b>	<b>No</b>
<u>Any of the three types</u> ( $p < .10$ )		
(N=450) Past 12 months without asking “ever”	50	50
(N=445) Past 12 months after asking “ever”	44	56
<u>Civic or community organization</u> ( $p < .10$ )		
(N = 447) Have you volunteered time in the last 12 months to work without pay for a civic or community organization, or a group providing social services?	35	65
(N = 442) Have you <b>ever</b> volunteered to work without pay for a civic or community organization? [If yes] Was this in the last 12 months?	30	70
<u>Education</u> ( $ns$ )		
(N = 449) Have you volunteered time in the last 12 months to work without pay for a group involved in education?	29	71
Experimental (N = 444) Have you <b>ever</b> volunteered to work without pay for a group involved in education? [If yes] Was this in the last 12 months?	27	73
<u>Political organization or candidates for office</u> ( $ns$ )		
(N = 449) Have you volunteered time in the last 12 months to work without pay for a political organization or candidates for office?	7	93
(N = 445) Have you <b>ever</b> volunteered to work without pay for a political organization or candidates for office? [If yes] Was this in the last 12 months?	7	93

Note: This table reports the percentage of respondents who said that they had volunteered for the specific type of organization (or any of the three types) during the past 12 months. For each pair of items, the first reflects the percentage who said they had done so in response to a question that *only* asked about the past twelve months. The second item in the pair shows the percentage saying they had volunteered in the past 12 months *after* having first been asked if the *ever* had done so.

**Table 4b: Results from QUESTION AMBIGUITY VOLUNTARISM  
question wording experiments in Virginia**

<b>Voluntarism - Virginia</b>	Yes	No
Pre-election		
Control (N = 297) Thinking about the last 12 months, have you spent time participating in any voluntary activity, or haven't you had time to do this?	51	49
Experimental (N = 303) By voluntary activity, I mean not just belonging to a service organization, but actually working in some way to help others for no monetary pay. Thinking about the last 12 months, have you spent time participating in any voluntary activity, or haven't you had time to do this?	50	50
Post-election		
Control (N = 134) Thinking about the last 12 months, have you spent time participating in any voluntary activity, or haven't you had time to do this?	63	37
Experimental (N = 129) By voluntary activity, I mean not just belonging to a service organization, but actually working in some way to help others for no monetary pay. Thinking about the last 12 months, have you spent time participating in any voluntary activity, or haven't you had time to do this?	51	49

**Table 5: Results from DISCUSSING POLITICS VS. ITEMS IN THE NEWS  
question wording experiments**

<b>Discussing Politics</b>				
New Jersey - Pre-election	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
How often do you talk about politics or government with your family or friends: very often, sometimes, rarely or never? (N=450)	48	40	8	3
How often do you talk about current events or things you have heard about in the news with your family or friends: very often, sometimes, rarely or never? (N = 445)	84	14	2	0

**Table 6A: Group Affiliation – Question Wording Experiments**

**Experiment 1, Form A:** Now we would like to know about the groups and organizations you might belong to. I am going to read a list of different types of organizations. For each type could you tell me how many groups - if any - you belong to or have given money to in the past 12 months.

- National or local charities such as the United Way, the Red Cross, the March of Dimes, or any similar organization.
- Labor unions or employee associations.
- Any association or group connected with a business or profession.
- Any association that looks after the interests of some kinds of people, such as the veterans, the elderly, the handicapped, children, or some other similar group.
- Any association that is concerned with social or political issues, such as reducing taxes, protecting the environment, promoting prayer in the schools, or any other causes.
- Sports, recreation, community, neighborhood, school, or youth organizations.
- Fraternities, lodges, nationality, or ethnic organizations.
- Cultural, literary, or art organizations.
- Any other groups.

*Within each category of group, respondents are asked:* Are you an active member of [this group][any of these groups], a member but not active, or have you given money only?

[Does this group][Do any of these groups] take stands on or discuss public issues, or try to influence governmental actions?

**Experiment 1, Form B:** Now we would like to know about the groups and organizations you might belong to. I'm interested in knowing about groups you're a member of, or donate money to. I'm talking about charities, labor unions, professional associations, political or social groups, sports and youth groups, and so forth. Do you belong to or donate money to any groups or associations, either locally or nationally? IF YES: About how many groups would you say you belong to or donate money to? Take your time and think about it

*Respondents who indicated affiliation with any groups are asked the following questions once:* Are you an active member of [this group][any of these groups], a member but not active, or have you given money only?

[Does this group][Do any of these groups] take stands on or discuss public issues, or try to influence governmental actions?

**Experiment 2:** I'd like to ask about groups and organizations some people belong to. Just tell me YES or NO if you have been involved with each in the past 12 months.

- National or local charities such as the United Way, the Red Cross, the March of Dimes, or any similar organization.
- Labor unions or employee associations.
- A business or professional association.
- Any association that looks after the interests of some kinds of people, such as the veterans, the elderly, the handicapped, children, or some other similar group.
- Any association that is concerned with social or political issues, such as reducing taxes, protecting the environment, promoting prayer in the schools, or any other causes.
- Sports, recreation, community, neighborhood, school, or youth organizations.
- Cultural, literary, or art organizations.
- Any other groups.

*Within each category of group, respondents are asked:* Are you an active member of [this group][any of these groups], a member but not active, or have you given money only?

[Does this group][Do any of these groups] take stands on or discuss public issues, or try to influence governmental actions?

**Table 6b: Group Affiliation Experiments**

	Experiment 1		Experiment 2
	Form A Asked about 9 categories, # of groups in each; followup questions in each category	Form B Single summary question about total # of groups, one set of follow up questions	Asked about 8 categories; followup questions in each category
Number of cases	(46)	(54)	(100)
% involved in at least one group	72	65	76
% active member of at least one group	24	37	49
% involved in one politically relevant group	28	37	43
Mean number of groups	3.17	3.02	
Mean number of categories of groups	1.80		2.00
Correlations between participation scale and:			
Involvement in any group	.42	.38	.29
Active membership in at least one group	.38	.62	.36
At least one group takes stands on political issues	.47	.44	.28
Involved in group in category of political or social issues	.40		.37
Number of groups	.35	.44	--
Number of categories of groups	.57	--	.48

**Table 7: Results from CONSUMER ACTIVISM question wording experiments**

Consumer Activism – Virginia Pre- and Post-Election	Pre-election Yes/No	Post-election Yes/No	% consistent Pre-Post
<p><b>Version A.</b> Sometimes people hear things they don't like about products or companies, such as learning certain brands of clothing have been made by people in sweatshops. In order to register a protest or send a message to the company who makes the product, people will avoid buying that product in the future. How about you? Have you ever avoided buying something in order to register a protest or send a message as a consumer, or haven't you ever done this?</p>	50/50 (N=297)	52/48 (N=134)	76.9 (N=65)
<p><b>Version B.</b> We all avoid places to eat or shop where we've received bad service. But have you ever heard something you didn't like about a product, corporation, recording artist or anything else that made you stop buying their product in order to register a protest or try to change their behavior, or haven't you ever done this?</p>	41/59 (N=303)	41/59 (N=129)	78.6 (N=70)
	<i>p</i> =.08	<i>p</i> =.017	

**Table 8: Consistency of Responses to Items across Pre and Post Election Surveys**

<b>Regularity of Voting - New Jersey</b>	<b>% who gave same answer</b>
We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and/or national elections? (N = 86)	83.7
Can you tell me how often you vote in local and/or national elections? (N = 76)	84.2
<b>Voted in last election - New Jersey and Virginia</b>	
Can you recall if you voted in the 2000 election between Al Gore and George W. Bush, or did something prevent you from voting? (New Jersey N = 424; Virginia N = 263)	92.0 (New Jersey) 94.3 (Virginia)
<b>Contacting Elected Officials - Virginia</b>	
In the past 12 months, have you initiated any contacts with a federal elected official or someone on the staff of such an official? I mean someone in the White House or a congressional or senate office? (N = 122)	89.5
How about an elected official on the state or local level – In the past 12 months, have you initiated any contacts with a governor or mayor, or a member of the state legislature, or a city or town council – or someone on the staff of such an elected official? (N = 124)	85.5
<b>Voluntarism - New Jersey</b>	
Have you ever volunteered to work without pay for a civic or community organization? [If yes] Was this in the last 12 months? (N = 255)	62.4
Have you ever volunteered to work without pay for a group involved in education? [If yes] Was this in the last 12 months? (N = 255)	64.7
Have you ever volunteered to work without pay for a political organization or candidates for office? [If yes] Was this in the last 12 months? (N = 255)	80.8
<b>Voluntarism - Virginia</b>	
Thinking about the last 12 months, have you spent time participating in any volunteer activity, or haven't you had time to do this? (N = 65)	70.8
By volunteer activity, I mean not just belonging to a service organization, but actually working in some way to help others for no monetary pay. Thinking about the last 12 months, have you spent time participating in any volunteer activity, or haven't you had time to do this? (N = 70)	78.6
<b>Protest - Virginia</b>	
Have you ever taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration on some national or local issue other than a strike against your employer? (N = 263)	92.4
In the past two years, since October 1999, have you taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration on some national or local issue other than a strike against your employer? (N = 46)	80.4

<b>Discussing Politics - New Jersey</b>	
How often do you talk about politics or government with family or friends? (N = 273)	52.7
<b>Political Knowledge - Virginia</b>	
Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington? (N = 255)	67.8
Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other on the national level? (N = 263)	74.5
Do you happen to know the names of the two current U.S. senators from Virginia? (N = 263)	71.1
<b>Media Use - New Jersey</b>	
In general, how often do you follow what is happening in government and politics? (N = 528)	59.7
Which of the following best describes you: I follow local community news closely most of the time, whether or not something important or interesting is happening; I follow local community news closely only when something important or interesting is happening; or I rarely follow local community news? (N = 528)	65.2
Which of the following best describes you: I follow national news closely most of the time, whether or not something important or interesting is happening; I follow national news closely only when something important or interesting is happening; or I rarely follow national community news? (N = 528)	73.7
Did you read a newspaper yesterday, or not? (N = 528)	76.7
<b>Interpersonal Trust - New Jersey</b>	
Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? (N = 528)	79.0
Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves? (N = 528)	76.9
<b>Interpersonal Trust - Virginia</b>	
Generally speaking, would you say that most of the time people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? (N = 263)	76.0
Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance or would they try to be fair? (N = 263)	77.9



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