

## Investigating comprehension problems in political attitude questions. Evidence from Voting Advice Applications

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## Voting Advice Applications..:



30 Opinion statements

Answers compared to party positions



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## Research question



- VAAs are survey-like instruments
- Good questions lead to better voting advice
- VAAs are used by many: interesting context to study survey-comprehension

What question characteristics cause comprehension difficulties in VAA statements?



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## Two studies

Study 1: qualitative  
Cognitive interviews & retrospective interviews  
→ with 60 VAA respondents  
→ VAA of the city of Utrecht

Study 2: quantitative  
Statistical analyses of all answers provided  
→ by 357,858 respondents  
→ to VAAs of 34 municipalities



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## Study 1: method

Cognitive interviews with 60 users filling out a VAA survey

Coders coded comprehension difficulties, and scored the types of problems observed:

- semantic problems, based on survey literature (i.e. negation), and inductively (unknown location);
- and pragmatic problems

Various coding rounds, with 3 coders  
Resulting Kappas substantial to excellent



## Study 1: results (1)

Type of problem	Example	N (%)
Unknown concept	What is the liveability budget?	82 (21.9%)
Unknown location	Where is the Polder Rijnenburg?	66 (17.6%)
Vagueness	Social facilities... like what? That is vague...	38 (10.1%)
Negation	The accessibility of the city is important, not very important, so a regular 'agree' (to a question about <u>not</u> widening road)"	10 (2.7%)
Double-barreledness	Loans yes, but subsidies no...euhm	6 (1.6%)



## Study 1: results (2)

### Type of problem

Unknown concept  
Unknown location  
Vagueness  
Negation

Double-barreledness  
Other

Pragmatic problem Increasing...How high is that budget now? 134 (35.7%)



## Study 1: results (3)

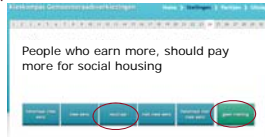
- What do respondents do when they experience comprehension problems?

	No sign of a Comprehension problem	Explicit Comprehension problem	Total
Directional answer	88.4% (1259)	44 % (159)	79.4% (1418)
Neutral Answer	10 % (142)	33 % (120)	14.7% (262)
No opinion answer	1.7 % (24)	22.7% (82)	5.9% (106)
Total	1425	361	1786



## Study 2: large-scale study

- Which question characteristics increase neutral and no-opinion responding?



- Statistical analysis of all answers provided by 357,858 VAA respondents to 34 VAAs during the Dutch Municipal Elections in 2014.



## Study 2: Results

Question characteristic	Increase No-Opinion	Increase Neutral
Geographical location	2.9%	4.7%
Proper name	0.9%	n.s.
Name of tax	0.6%	n.s.
Municipal jargon	0.4%	n.s.
Vague quantifying term	n.s.	3.5%
Abstract location description	n.s.	-
Double-barrelled	-	-

Names & jargon = semantic → more "no opinion"  
 Vague quantifiers = pragmatics → more "neutral"...



## Conclusions

- Municipal jargon, tax names, geographical locations, and vague quantifiers complicate the question.  
Avoid or explain!
- Cognitive interviews & large-scale statistical analysis are a fruitful combination of methods
- The choice for 'neutral' or 'no-opinion' does not seem arbitrary



## Thank you for your attention



Read more about our research project, or ask for our paper:

<http://vavi.wp.hum.uu.nl/>

