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

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?

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
**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)**

The A27 near Amelisweerd should not be widened (1.6%)

**Study 1: results (2)**

- What do respondents do when they experience comprehension problems?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of problem</th>
<th>No sign of a Comprehension problem</th>
<th>Explicit Comprehension problem</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directional answer</td>
<td>88.4% (1259)</td>
<td>44 % (159)</td>
<td>79.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral Answer</td>
<td>10 % (142)</td>
<td>33 % (120)</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion answer</td>
<td>1.7 % (24)</td>
<td>22.7% (82)</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1425</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>1786</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Study 1: results (3)**

Parking fees in Utrecht may be increased
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 VAA during the Dutch Municipal Elections in 2014.

Study 2: Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question characteristic</th>
<th>Increase No-Opinion</th>
<th>Increase Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographical location</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proper name</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of tax</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal jargon</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vague quantifying term</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract location description</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double &amp; jargon</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 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

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/](http://vavi.wp.hum.uu.nl/)