

The SOM Institute's Notes on Survey Methodology - 2024:3

Reporting left-right ideology with different verbally labeled end-points

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ABSTRACT

This note presents the results of an experiment in the Swedish Citizen Panel where respondents were randomly assigned to report their left-right ideology with one of two versions of response options. One group reported their ideology with response options with end-points labeled “left” and “right”, and the other reported their ideology with response options with end-points labeled “far to the left” and “far to the right”. Regardless of what labels the end-points had, respondents reported similar average ideology and with equal distribution across the response options. However, additional analyses revealed that respondents who reported voting for the Left Party or the Moderate Party were nudged toward the middle of the available response options when end-points were labeled “far to the left” or “far to the right” compared to “left” and “right.”.

INTRODUCTION

Political scientists have relied on the so-called left-right ideology scale to measure individuals' ideology (Kroh, 2007). For citizens, left-right ideology serves as a shortcut for making reasoned political choices without expending significant cognitive effort to understand policy proposals, as well as to derive specific policy goals out of abstract ideological labels (Zechmeister, 2006; Bauer et al, 2017). In Western democracies, individuals' self-placements on the left-right ideological scale have been found to correlate strongly with party support and vote choice (e.g. Knudsen, 1997).

In most of the comparative surveys, such as the European Social Survey (ESS), the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), and the World Value Survey (WVS) respondents report their left-right ideology with eleven numbered horizontally presented response options where the end-point response options are verbally labeled "left 0" and "right 10". Respondents of the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES), the second longest-running election study in the world, instead report their left-right ideology with similar horizontally presented numbered response options but with end-points verbally labeled "far to the left 0" and "far to the right 10". However, in the national election study of 2018, the end-points were labeled "left" and "right", removing "far to the" from the end-point verbal labels. Additionally, respondents of the national election study of 2018 reported their left-right ideology without a labeled mid-point, whereas respondents of the CSES survey reported their ideological orientation with a labeled-mid point. This alternation poses an intriguing question: to what extent are respondents' left-right ideological self-placement affected by varying the verbal end-point labels?

This note presents the results of an experiment administered to the Swedish Citizen Panel (SCP), where 1,322 respondents were randomly assigned to report their left-right ideology with end-points verbally labeled “left 0” and “right 10” or “far to the left 0” and “far to the right 10.”

METHOD

PROCEDURE

The experiment was administered through an online questionnaire between 4 June and 27 June 2019, with reminders sent on June 13 and June 18, 2019. A total of 2,000 panelists were invited to complete the questionnaire and 1,322 completed it (AAPOR Participation Rate: 63%). Respondents first reported which party they voted for in the 2019 European Parliamentary Election and the 2018 Swedish Parliamentary Election. Then, respondents reported their left-right ideology by answering “It is sometimes said that political views can be placed on a left-right scale. Where would you place yourself on such a left-right scale?” and were randomly assigned to answer the question with the end-points verbally labeled either “left” and “right” or “far to the left” and “far to the right.”

EVALUATION CRITERIA

COST OF ADMINISTRATION

The impact that the verbal labeling of response options was assessed by estimating the cost of administration (i.e., the time it took the respondents to report their left-right ideology). Longer administration times may indicate that the respondents struggled to place formed judgment into one of the response options offered. To reduce the impact of outliers in

administration time, administration times shorter than the interquartile range of the sample response times * 1.5 and longer than the interquartile range * 1.5 were excluded from the cost of administration analysis (following McGill et al., 1978). The lower bound for the excluded outliers was 0 seconds, and the upper bound was 28.7 seconds.

LEFT-RIGHT IDEOLOGY

The effect of the two different verbally labeled end-points on reported left-right ideology was estimated by implementing a chi-square test of distributions, assessing whether the distribution over response options differed between the two experimental groups. Both of the two differently labeled end-point questions included a mid-point labeled “neither to the left nor to the right.” Furthermore, a two-sided *t*-test was implemented to assess whether mean left-right ideology differed between the groups. Additional *t*-tests were implemented to assess whether the verbal end-point labels had differing effects depending on for which political party the respondent had voted.

CONCURRENT VALIDITY

Finally, concurrent validity was assessed. Concurrent validity is the rate by which two theoretically and empirically related constructs measured at roughly the same point in time correlate with each other. Response options that allow respondents to report their ideology more accurately will yield less measurement error and, in turn, result in stronger association and concurrent validity with factors theoretically and empirically related to the ideology being measured. In this note, education and income served as criterion variables since political science research has found a strong relationship between education, income, party choice, and left-right ideology (e.g. Meyer, 2017; Bakker, 2017).

Concurrent validity was evaluated by estimating the parameters of OLS regressions predicting the criteria questions (education, income, or party) with the target item (left-right ideology), a dummy for whether left-right ideology was reported with “far to the the” label or not, and the interaction between the target and the dummy (following Shaeffer et al., 2005). A statistically significant positive parameter for the interaction meant that concurrent validity was greater when the end-point response options were labeled “far to the left/right”, and a negative parameter meant that the concurrent validity was greater when the end-point response options were labeled “left” or “right.”

RESULTS

COST OF ADMINISTRATION

Respondents reported their left-right ideology equally fast regardless of what labels were used for the end-points. When reporting their ideology with end-points labeled “far to the left/right”, respondents took just as long ($M = 13$ seconds, $SD = 5$) as respondents who reported it with only “left/right” as verbal end-points ($M = 12$ seconds, $SD = 5$, $t(0.98)$, $p = .33$). The results indicated that the use of different end-point labels did not affect the cognitive effort respondents’ needed for reporting their ideology.

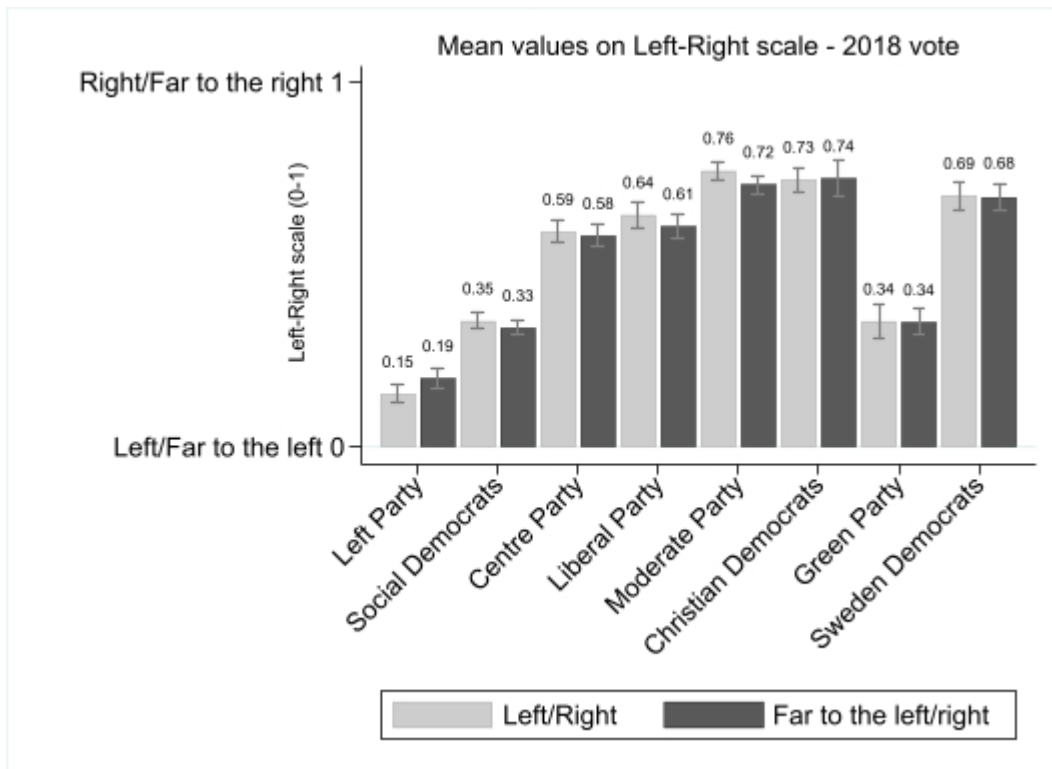
DISTRIBUTION OF THE LEFT-RIGHT IDEOLOGY

Respondents reported similar left-right ideology regardless of how the end-points were verbally labeled. That is, the responses were equally distributed across the eleven response options when end-points were labeled “far to the left/right” compared to just “left/right” ($\chi^2(10, 1319) = 12.65$, $p = .24$). Similarly, a two-sample t -test revealed that respondents reported similar average left-right ideology when reporting it with “far to the left/right”

verbally labeled end-points ($M = 0.49$, $SD = 0.24$) as when reporting it with “left/right” verbally labeled end-points ($M = 0.51$, $SD = 0.26$, $p = .10$).

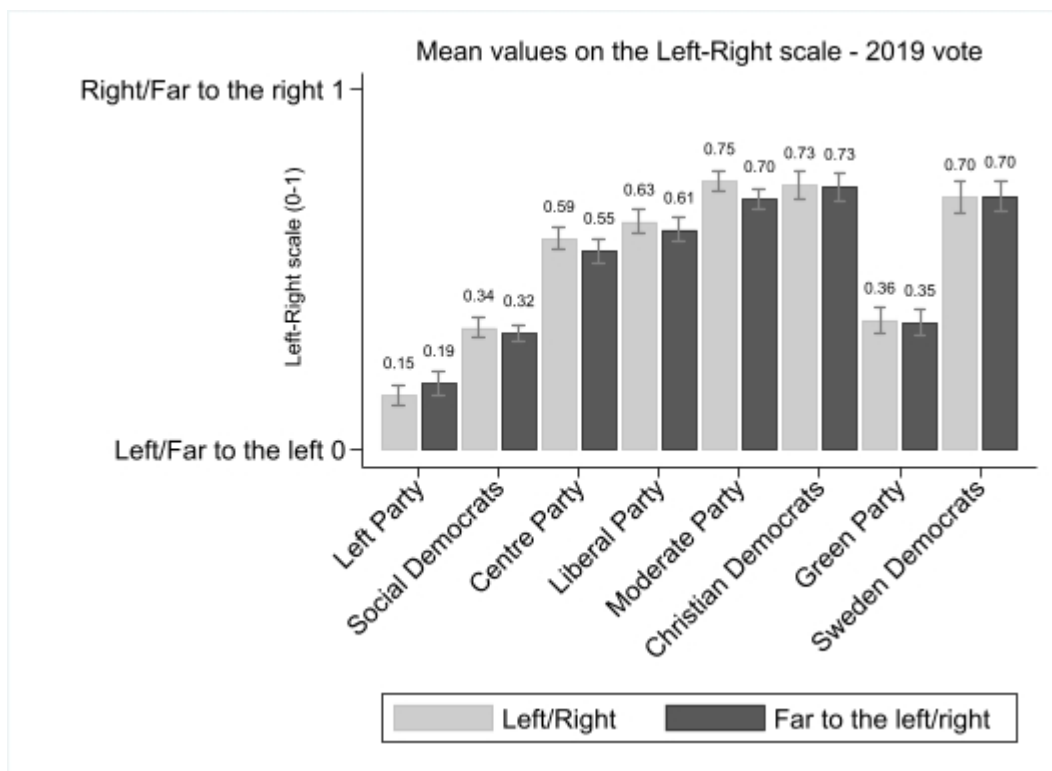
However, when exploring the data further, respondents who voted for the Left Party or the Moderate Party in the 2018 Parliamentary election reported their left-right ideology differently depending on how the end-points were verbally labeled. Left Party voters were more likely to choose response options toward the lower numbered response options when the end-points were labeled “left/right” ($M = 0.15$, $SD = 0.12$) than when the end-points were labeled “far to the left/right” ($M = 0.19$, $SD = 0.14$, $t(188) = 2.29$, $p = 0.02$). Similarly, Moderate Party voters chose response options toward the higher numbered response options when the end-points were labeled “left/right” ($M = 0.76$, $SD = 0.12$) than when the end-points were labeled “far to the left/right” ($M = 0.72$, $SD = 0.11$, $t(164) = -2.10$, $p = 0.04$) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Mean values of the left-right scale (coded 0-1) across party vote in the 2018 Riksdag elections



As a robustness check, a similar analysis of the 2019 EU parliamentary election again revealed that Moderate Party voters reported stronger right-wing ideology when reporting their ideology with “left/right” ($M = 0.75$, $SD = 0.14$) compared to Modere Party voters reporting it with “far to the left/right” ($M = 0.70$, $SD = 0.11$) (see Figure 2). Using the EU parliamentary vote question, significant differences were only found among Moderate Party voters ($p = .02$).

Figure 2. Mean values of the left-right scale (coded 0-1) across party vote in the 2019 European Parliament elections



CONCURRENT VALIDITY

Neither of the two versions of the verbally labeled end-points measured ideology more validly than the other. A concurrent validity analysis indicated that the relationship between the criteria variables (education, income, and party) and left-right ideology was equally strong among respondents who reported their ideology with end-points labeled “left/right” as for respondents reporting it with “far to the left/right” (education: $b_{\text{left-right} * \text{end-points labeled far to the left/right}} = 0.01$, $SE = 0.46$, $p = .98$, $N = 1,319$; income: $b_{\text{left-right} * \text{end-points labeled far to the left/right}} = -0.51$, $SE = 0.71$, $p = .47$, $N = 1,264$; party: $b_{\text{left-right} * \text{end-points labeled far to the left/right}} = 0.24$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .21$, $N = 1,231$)

Table 1. OLS regressions with education, income, and party as criteria variables.

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Education	Income	Party
Ideology			
Left-right ideology	-0.50 (0.31)	2.53*** (0.47)	3.994*** (0.13)
Experimental group			
End-points labeled far to the left/right	0.07 (0.26)	0.24 (0.39)	-0.13 (0.10)
Interaction			
Left-right position x End-points labeled far to the left/right	0.01 (0.46)	-0.51 (0.71)	0.24 (0.19)
Intercept	6.39*** (0.18)	6.85*** (0.27)	0.92*** (0.07)
Adjusted R^2	0.002	0.031	0.613
Observations	1,319	1,264	1,231

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. Left-right position coded 0 = Left/far to the left to 1 = Right/far to the right. Education coded 1 = Lowest education, to 9 = Highest education. Income coded 1 = Lowest income to 13 = Highest income. Party coded 1 = Extreme left parties (Left Party), 2 = Left/Centre left parties (Social Democrats and Greens), 3 = Liberal parties (Centre and Liberals), 4 = Right/Conservative parties (Moderates and Christian Democrats), 5 = Extreme right parties (Sweden Democrats).

+ $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

CONCLUSION

The results from this methodological note indicated that the wording of end-point labels had only a limited effect on voters' reports of ideology. Respondents reported their ideology equally fast, at similar strengths, and with equal validity regardless of whether they reported their ideology with end-points labeled "left" and "right" or "far to the left" and "far to the right". Overall, the results suggest that the change of verbal labels on the end-points introduced by the Swedish National Election studies in 2018 had, at the most, a minor impact on point estimates and validity of the ideology measurement compared to the

measurements of ideology in previous election years. Only a minor exception to this conclusion was found for respondents who voted for the Left Party or the Moderate party, where removing the “far to the” pushed those respondents to the end-points of the measurement, leading to more left-wing (for the Left Party voters) or more right-wing (for the Moderate party) reports of ideology.

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The SOM Institute is an academic organization located at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Since 1986 the SOM Institute conducts annual cross-sectional surveys among the Swedish population with a focus on Society, Opinion, and Media, as well as administering the web panel called the Swedish Citizen Panel. The annual surveys and the web panel both function as infrastructures, enabling researchers and public organizations to effectively collect research and opinion data in collaboration with researchers at the SOM Institute.

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