

Memo on Common Content Political Participation Battery

Chris Karpowitz & Jeremy C. Pope

Our aim in the Common Content questions regarding participation should be to cover the primary ways ordinary citizens involve themselves in representative government. This approach to citizen participation emphasizes activities that require effort from the citizens themselves and that are oriented toward affecting political outcomes. According to the classic work of Verba and Nie (1971), political participation can be divided into four distinct categories – voting, campaigning, contacting, and communal activity. More recently, others have argued that contributing money to a campaign comprises a distinct mode or category of participation (Claggett and Pollock 2006). While questions about voting, campaigning and contributing money are currently part of the planning for the 2008 CCES, we suggest that two additional questions be added to the post-election wave of the Common Content in order to better measure citizens' efforts to contact their representatives and to engage with their local communities (to our knowledge this will be the *only* survey capable of discerning state or regional variation in participation levels).

For purposes of comparison across different types of citizen engagement, the participation questions need to ask about a consistent time frame within which the citizen activity might have occurred. Many recent surveys of participation (see Verba, Scholzman, and Brady's 1990 Citizen Participation Study or Putnam's 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey for examples) use the past 12 months as the time frame, and we favor this basic approach.

The planning document indicates that questions about campaign activity and campaign contributions will be part of the Common Content. We strongly support the inclusion of these questions and suggest specific question wording below.

Lawn sign or bumper sticker:

Suggested question wording (similar to the ANES question): "During the past 12 months, did you wear a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on your car, or place a campaign sign in your window or in front of your house?"

Give Money (2)

We assume that the wording of these questions will be similar to what was asked on the 2006 CCES: "During the past 12 months, did you donate money to any candidates for office or to political party committees?" and "Approximately how much did you contribute over the last 12 months?"

Contacting

Past CCES questions have focused on the extent to which citizens received contact from the campaigns:

"During the November election campaign, did a candidate, party organization, or other organization contact you to get you to vote?"

This is a valuable question that should be retained but it focuses only on contact from candidates to potential voters—an activity which we think is better described as "mobilization" (see Rosenstone and Hansen 1993) rather than "participation." A more complete picture of citizen participation would also include a question about the extent to which survey respondents have attempted to contact public officials. For that reason, we suggest that the following question be added:

“During the past 12 months, did you personally contact any public official? This could be by telephone, email, letter, or face-to-face.”

Because the category of “public officials” is broad and may include local, state, or national officials, we suggest a follow-up question that will only be asked of those who said yes to the initial question:

“What sort of official did you contact? (Check all that apply.)”

- A local community official, such as the mayor or member of the town council
- A state official, such as a state legislator or the governor
- A national representative, such as a senator or member of Congress

We believe the follow-up is an efficient way to dramatically increase our understanding of citizen contacting without substantially adding to the length of the survey. Because only those who answer the first question affirmatively will receive the follow-up, we anticipate that no more than 20 percent of the sample will receive the second question, which itself is short and easy to complete. Including the question and follow-up on the CCES Common Content also represents a unique chance to explore state and regional variation in citizens’ willingness to reach out to different levels of government. During the Planning Group conference call, Tom Carsey also indicated strong support for exploring contacting at various levels of government.

Community Meetings

The CCES Common Content also represents a valuable opportunity to explore citizen participation in formal institutions of local politics. Though previous survey efforts (including the ANES, Roper, and the Community Participation Survey) have asked about such participation, the research design of those efforts did not include enough respondents to understand state or regional variation in such activity. We believe the 2008 CCES can, therefore, contribute significantly to the discipline’s understanding of citizen engagement in their communities. We suggest the following question wording, which is substantially similar to that employed by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995):

“During the past twelve months, did you attend a meeting of an official local government board or council that deals with community problems and issues, such as a town council, a school board, or a planning board?”

Response Options

One of the most well-known challenges survey researchers face when asking about political participation is response bias due to social desirability effects. Unlike the questions about voting, which can be validated, questions about contacting, campaigning, or attending community meetings cannot be independently verified. One strategy for reducing over-reporting of participation is to change the question wording. The ANES and other surveys introduce the voting question, for example, with a caveat about many people not being able to vote because “they weren’t registered, they were sick, or they just didn’t have time.” Another strategy is to give respondents options beyond “yes” and “no” when it comes to participation questions (see, for example, the discussion in Weisberg 2005). With respect to the questions about community meetings, contacting public officials, and participating in campaign activities, we thus suggest adding a third response option that may reduce the tendency toward over-reporting:

- Yes

- No
- I have [attended a meeting/contacted a public official/participated in a campaign activity] in the past, but not during the past 12 months.

Persuade others

Though this question is not included in the 2008 planning document, the 2006 CCES did ask about the extent to which individuals tried to persuade others to vote or how to vote. We think this a valuable question to retain in 2008, with a minor change to ask about the past 12 months instead of the past 3 months for purposes of consistency across the different participation questions: “During the past 12 months, did you try to persuade anyone else to vote or how to vote?”