

Internet Surveys and Political Attitudes: 'Feedback to Respondents'

Experiments in the 2005 British Election Study

by

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The 2005 British Election Study (BES) used opportunities presented by the internet survey mode to conduct experiments based on providing feedback to respondents. Specifically, we supplied respondents with accurate information concerning their self-placement on two ideological position scales, but manipulated the *context* in which the information was provided. Analyses indicate that the precise form of the party stimulus that is used to vary the context is less important in determining the way respondents react than the fact that the respondent can see themselves in relation to some other actor(s). The general impact of our provision of feedback was to make all groups of respondents more inclined to re-characterise themselves as 'more liberal' and to make some groups of respondents more inclined to re-characterise themselves as more in favour of higher taxes. These self-revised measures of ideological position proved to be less powerful predictors of voting behaviour than their initial un-revised counterparts. We conclude that the initial, pre-treatment ideology scale measures were a more accurate representation of respondents' positions than their post-treatment equivalents. We suspect that the latter may be contaminated by self-imposed notions of 'political correctness'.

Internet Surveys and Political Attitudes: 'Feedback to Respondents' Experiments in the 2005 British Election Study

There is increasing evidence to suggest that well-designed and well-executed internet surveys can make important contributions to understanding political attitudes and behaviour. This paper is an initial report of the results of a 'feedback-to-respondent' internet survey experiment performed as part of the 2005 British Election Study (BES). Fieldwork for the survey was conducted by YouGov, the internet survey market leader in the UK. YouGov uses a similar methodology to that employed by Harris Interactive in the US. Respondents to any given survey are selected randomly from a larger pool of people, recruited from a wide range of internet sources, who have already agreed to participate in YouGov surveys. Contrary to initial expectations, the results of the experiment suggest that providing feedback to respondents about where they have located themselves in a two-dimensional ideological space – and then allowing them to relocate themselves in that space – does not improve the capacity of ideological measures to predict party choice.

The Feedback-to-Respondent Experiments

In the baseline pre-election wave of the 2005 BES internet survey (N = 7993) we conducted a series of split sample experiments.¹ During the survey we asked respondents to place themselves and the major parties on two 0-10 'trade-off' ideological scales, one ('tax/spend') aimed at tapping respondents attitudes to the traditional economic left-right dimension, and the other ('punish criminals/protect rights') aimed at measuring respondents' views on a liberal-authoritarian dimension. The question wordings are as follows:

Tax/Spend Dimension:

Using the 0 to 10 scale on this card, where the end marked 0 means that government should **cut taxes and spend much less on health and social services**, and the end marked 10 means that government should **raise taxes a lot and spend much more on**

health and social services, where would you place [yourself, the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrat Party] on this scale?

Liberal/Authoritarian Dimension:

Some people think that **reducing crime** is more important than **protecting the rights of people accused of committing crimes**. Other people think that protecting the rights of accused people is more important than reducing crime. On the 0-10 scale below, where would you place your own view?

The responses were coded so that a high score on the tax/spend scale denoted a strong preference for higher taxes and more spent on public services, whereas a low score denoted a strong preference for lower taxes and less spent on public services. Similarly, a high score on the punish/protect scale indicated a stronger preference for protecting the rights of the accused; a low score indicated a stronger preference for punishing criminals.

Near the end of the survey we presented respondents with a two-dimensional graph, with its axes defined by the tax/spend and punish/protect scales, and indicated to them where they were located in that 2-d space. An analogue of the screen respondents saw is shown in Figure 1. Respondents were invited to re-position themselves if they felt that our initial measures had positioned them incorrectly. In addition, we varied the precise nature of the stimulus provided to respondents at this stage. We *randomly* split the sample into nine different groups: eight treatment groups and a control. The control group simply involved showing the respondent where s/he was located in the 2-d space. The treatment groups involved providing respondents with additional information, for example indicating where ‘the average respondent’ or the ‘supporters’ or leaders of different parties were located. The various treatment conditions are outlined in Table 1.

(Figure 1 and Table 1 about here)

In devising these tests we had two principal objectives. First, we wished to know if, simply by providing respondents with a graphical representation of where our measures suggested they were located in a 2-d space and by inviting them to indicate their 'real' position, we could 'improve' our ability accurately to measure their political attitudes. We indicate below exactly what we mean by 'improving' our measures. Second, we wished to establish the extent to which different sorts of treatment stimuli might provoke respondents into adjusting their positions in the 2-d space and to what extent. For example, given the emerging literature on the importance of leader images as heuristic shortcuts to party choice decisions, we thought it might be the case that respondents would be more likely adjust their own positions if they were presented with a graph which showed the positions of the leaders of the three main parties.

Table 2 reports the mean scores on our two 0-10 ideology scales, before and after our experimental manipulations. The results show the average scores for all respondents and for each treatment group. The column headed 'Exp1' is the control group, where respondents had only their own position fed back to them; the manipulations involved in the other experimental groups are defined in Table 1. The results in Table 2 indicate that there were changes in the mean scores across nearly all groups on both scales. Across all groups the pre-experiment mean score on the tax/spend measure was 5.53. This increased to 5.57 after respondents had been allowed to re-position themselves. Similarly, across all groups, the pre-experiment mean score on the punish/protect scale was 2.23. This increased to 2.53 after the experimental manipulation.

(Table 2 about here)

With any experimental design of this sort, we would expect some random fluctuation across the different groups and measures. The crucial question is whether or not the various changes in mean scores shown in Table 2 are statistically significant. The relevant difference-of-means tests are conducted in Tables 3 and 4. Table 3 shows the pattern of significance for the tax/spend scale measures. In four of the eight treatment groups (Exp3, Exp4, Exp6 and Exp7), there was a significant increase in mean score. This indicates that some respondents in these groups in effect moved themselves to the 'left' – they indicated that they were more in favour of higher taxes and more spent on services than in their initial (pre-experiment) responses. Note, however, that the average score for the control group (Exp1) also increased significantly (mean change = +.06). This suggests that it was not the *additional* (party supporter, party and leader position) stimuli provided in Exp3, Exp4, Exp6 and Exp7 that provoked the change in the treatment groups. It seems more likely that some respondents, who happened to be allocated disproportionately to Exp1, Exp3, Exp4, Exp6 and Exp7, simply felt that they were more in favour higher taxes and spending when they saw where they were located in the 2-d space. We return to the potential relevance of these changes below.

(Table 3 about here)

Table 4 shows whether or not the pre-post experiment changes in the punish/protect scale scores were statistically significant. The pattern of change evident here is much stronger and more consistent than in Table 3. Across every single treatment group, there is a significant increase the pre-post scores. Note that these increases mean that respondents in all treatment groups on average wanted to relocate themselves as being *more liberal* on the punish/protect scale. Crucially, in the control group (Exp1) there is no significant increase in the pre-post average score.

What this suggest is that any sort of party cue, rather than just the respondent's own location, is capable of stimulating respondents into relocating their position on the punish/protect scale. Simply being shown where one is located in the 2-d space in comparison with the party positions (whether those positions involve supporters, leaders, the parties themselves, or some combination) seems to be sufficient to lead many respondents to wish to indicate that they are more liberal than they originally intimated.

(Table 4 about here)

A further insight into these changes is provided in Table 5. The table breaks down the changes in the pre-post experiment tax/spend and punish/protect scores by vote choice. As the table shows, in terms of the tax/spend dimension, it was only Labour and Liberal Democrat voters who significantly increased their average tax/spend scores. Conservative and 'other party' voters did not significantly adjust their scores. In essence, therefore, it was only the supporters of the two centre-left parties who felt the need to indicate that they were more to the left on tax/spend than they had indicated in their pre-experiment responses. A similar, though even more pronounced, pattern is evident in relation to the punish/protect scale. Respondents in all four voting categories wished, on average, to relocate themselves at a more liberal point on the punish/protect scale. The effect was much larger for Labour (+.30) and Liberal Democrat (+.25) voters than it was for Conservatives (+.11) or others (+.14). Again, therefore, it is supporters of the more left-leaning parties that wish to move themselves the most (in a liberal direction) when they are confronted with the party stimuli embodied in our experimental manipulations.

(Table 5 about here)

In some respects, the fact that different groups of respondents indicated their desire to relocate themselves in our 2-d ideological space is interesting in its own right. However, as we indicated earlier, we were interested to know if, by allowing respondents to relocate themselves, we could produce ‘improved’ measures of ideological position. How can we tell if one measure represents an ‘improvement’ (or otherwise) on another? We employ the simple device of using pre-experiment and post-experiment measures of tax/spend and punish/protect to predict vote choice. We define a post- measure as being superior to a pre- measure (or *vice versa*) if it is better able to predict actual vote in the general election. In order to conduct these tests, we need to specify a plausible vote choice model that allows the tax/spend and punish/protect ideological scales a reasonable opportunity to demonstrate their explanatory power. In the context of such model, we can then compare the effects of the pre- and post-test measures of tax/spend and punish/protect and determine which (if either) are the stronger.

Our present model specification is generally similar to those employed in our analyses of the 2001 and 2005 British general elections (see Clarke et al., 2004, 2006; Whiteley et al., 2006). Note, however, that we do not include party identification variables in the present model. It is well known that measures of partisanship are highly correlated with measures of Downsian ideological spatial distance (see, e.g., Merrill and Grofman, 1999). By omitting the partisanship variables, we give the ideological scale scores maximum opportunity to have a significant impact on vote choice. Note also that since we are interested in studying the effects of ideological proximity to the Conservative Party as well as Labour, we include a variable measuring the distance between the respondent and the Conservative Party on both the tax/spend and punish/protect scales to the specification. Table 6 reports the results

of estimating this model in order to predict Labour voting, using the pre-experimental ideological scale measures.² The results are again well-determined, with all coefficients correctly signed and statistically significant. The pseudo-R² value (.60) is acceptable and the 83.6 percent of cases are correctly predicted. The crucial point, however, is that the four measures of ideological distance all exert significant effects, even when appropriate controls are made for other significant predictor variables.

Table 7 provides a ‘reduced form’ version of the model shown in Table 6, using only the pre-experiment ideological distance variables to predict Labour voting. Two features of the table need to be highlighted. First, the coefficients are all significant and correctly signed: the Labour terms (since they measure the respondent’s distance from Labour) have negative coefficients, while the Conservative terms have positive coefficients. Second, the pseudo-r² value is .37 – implying that some 37 percent of the variance in Labour/not voting can be explained by the pre-experiment measures of ideological distance.

(Table 7 about here)

The crucial question is how far this position changes with the post-experimental data. Do the post-experimental measures of ideological position – after respondents have been allowed, under different stimuli, to relocate themselves on the two ideological scales – provide a better or a worse statistical explanation of the Labour/not vote decision? And how do the pre- and post-experiment measures perform in predicting Conservative voting?

Table 8 reveals all. It provides the pseudo R² values from a series of logistic regressions, covering both all respondents and respondents grouped according to experimental treatment group. Although we do not provide the details here, we can confirm that every coefficient in every model reported in Table 8 was correctly signed

and statistically significant. What do the results suggest? Consider, first, the ‘all cases combined’ row at the foot of the table. The R^2 value for the pre-experimental measures in the Labour/not model is .37. This is the figure reported in Table 7. The equivalent figure for the post-experimental ideology measures is .33, a 4-point reduction. The counterpart R^2 value for Conservative voting as predicted by the pre-experiment measures is .55. When the post-experiment measures are used, however, the R^2 value falls to .49, a 6-point reduction. Close inspection of Table 8 shows that in every single experimental group, including the control group, some sort of reduction in R^2 values occurs as we move from the pre- to the post-experimental measures. This pattern suggests a simple but powerful conclusion: the pre-experimental measures are better at predicting how people actually vote in the election than the post-experimental measures, where respondents have been allowed to make adjustments to their scale positions. Using the traditional principles of convergent validity, we infer from this pattern that, contrary to our initial expectations, the unadjusted pre-experimental measures of scale position are superior to the post-experimental measures. It would appear that providing feedback to respondents about their positions in a 2-d space and inviting them to adjust their position as they see fit does not elicit an improved set of measures.

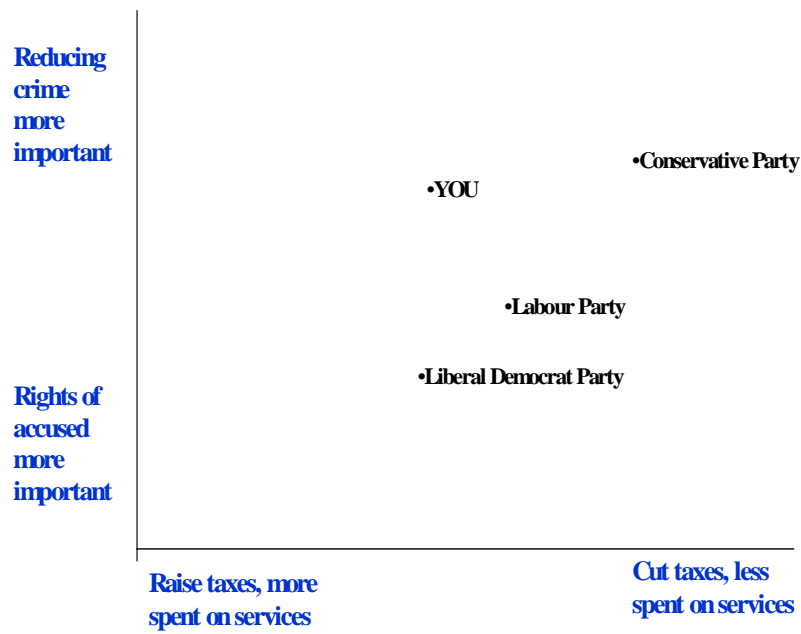
Conclusion

What, overall, can be concluded from our feedback-to-respondent experiments? First, it is clear that in terms of the tax/spend dimension, the precise form of the experimental manipulation is less important than the fact that respondents’ positions are relayed back to them. The fact that the control group respondents, as well as an apparently random subset of the treatment groups, became more pro-tax in response to feedback suggests that some respondents simply like to think of

themselves as being more 'pro-tax' than their initial scale responses would suggest. Second, in relation to the punish/protect liberal-authoritarian scale, there was a sharp differentiation between the responses of the control group (which did not wish to change their scale positions) and the responses of all of the treatment groups (which did). The ubiquity of our respondents' desire to appear more liberal in the face of any kind of party political stimulus, as expressed in the various experimental treatments, suggests to us that the party cues perhaps elicited a sort of 'politically correct' response in which, confronted with party positions for comparison, respondents did not wish to define themselves as being quite as illiberal as they initially placed themselves. The third conclusion is simply that the pre-treatment measures were better predictors of vote preference than the post-treatment measures. Providing additional party-cue information to respondents may serve simply to encourage a more 'politically correct' (liberal) response. It does not appear to improve measures of spatial positioning.

Figure 1: Analogue of Screen in Feedback-to-Respondent Experiments

Earlier in the survey we asked you for your views about taxes and public spending. We also asked you for your views about the importance of reducing crime versus the importance of protecting the rights of the accused. The graph below indicates the point that we think best summarises your position. The graph also shows the positions of the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrat party:



Did we locate you in the right place?

- Yes: please click to submit
- No: Please point and click your mouse to indicate the point on the graph that you think best summarises your position
- Don't know

Table 1. Summary of Split Sample Experimental Treatments

Treatment 1:	CONTROL = Respondent's position only
Treatment 2:	Respondent plus 'the average voter'
Treatment 3:	Respondent plus 'party supporters' – 'Labour supporters', 'Conservative supporters' and 'Liberal Democrat supporters'
Treatment 4:	Respondent plus 'party leaders' – Tony Blair, Michael Howard and Charles Kennedy
Treatment 5:	Respondent plus 'leaders with party labels' – Tony Blair and the Labour Party, Michael Howard and the Conservative Party, Charles Kennedy and the Liberal Democrat Party
Treatment 6:	Respondent plus 'parties 1983 scenario' – Labour positioned towards the bottom-left corner of the space; Conservatives towards the top-right; Liberal Democrats in the centre
Treatment 7:	Respondent plus 'parties 1964 scenario' – all three parties positioned very close to the centre of the space with Labour slightly towards bottom left and Conservatives slightly towards top-right
Treatment 8:	Respondent plus 'parties 2005' – Labour and Liberal Democrats fairly close to centre, with Liberal Democrats slightly nearer to bottom left; Conservatives towards top-right
Treatment 9:	Respondent plus 'party supporters and leaders' – 'Tony Blair and Labour supporters', 'Michael Howard and Conservative supporters', 'Charles Kennedy and Liberal Democrat supporters'.

Table 2. Average Scores on Taxes versus Services Scale and Punish Criminals versus Protect Rights Scale, before and after Experimental Manipulations

<i>Scale</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Exp1</i>	<i>Exp2</i>	<i>Exp3</i>	<i>Exp4</i>	<i>Exp5</i>	<i>Exp6</i>	<i>Exp7</i>	<i>Exp8</i>	<i>Exp9</i>
Pre tax	5.53	5.52	5.63	5.56	5.48	5.61	5.48	5.55	5.46	5.51
Post tax	5.57	5.59	5.63	5.68	5.54	5.61	5.56	5.63	5.40	5.50
Pre rights	2.23	2.33	2.37	2.31	2.36	2.47	2.36	2.22	2.24	2.41
Post rights	2.53	2.29	2.49	2.69	2.47	2.64	2.62	2.61	2.34	2.59
N		619	650	638	600	637	636	626	612	614

All scales are 0-10. Total effective N is 5613. A higher score on the Pre and Post Tax scales denotes a stronger preference for higher taxes and more spent on services; a lower score denotes a stronger preference for lower taxes and less spent on services. A higher score on the Pre and Post Rights scales denotes a stronger preference for the rights of the accused; a lower score denotes stronger preference for punishing criminals.

**Table 3. Average Change in Score on Taxes versus Services Scale,
Pre-Post Split Sample Experiments**

	<i>All</i>	<i>Exp1</i>	<i>Exp2</i>	<i>Exp3</i>	<i>Exp4</i>	<i>Exp5</i>	<i>Exp6</i>	<i>Exp7</i>	<i>Exp8</i>	<i>Exp9</i>
Change	+.04	+.06	-.00	+.12	+.06	-.00	+.08	+.08	-.06	-.01
df	5630	618	649	637	599	636	635	625	611	613
p	.00	.01	.93	.00	.05	.97	.01	.04	.08	.73

Scale is 0-10. A higher score on scale denotes a stronger preference for higher taxes and more spent on services; a lower score denotes a stronger preference for lower taxes and less spent on services. Statistically significant changes (at .05 or better) in bold.

Table 4. Average Change in Score on Punish Criminals versus Protect Rights Scale, Pre-Post Split Sample Experiments

	<i>All</i>	<i>Exp1</i>	<i>Exp2</i>	<i>Exp3</i>	<i>Exp4</i>	<i>Exp5</i>	<i>Exp6</i>	<i>Exp7</i>	<i>Exp8</i>	<i>Exp9</i>
Change	+.19	-.04	+.11	+.39	+.11	+.17	+.26	+.39	+.10	+.18
df	5630	618	649	637	599	636	635	625	611	613
p	.00	.31	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.02	.00

Scale is 0-10. A higher score on scale denotes a stronger preference for the rights of the accused; a lower score denotes stronger preference for punishing criminals. Statistically significant changes (at .05 or better) in bold.

Table 5. Summary of Pre-Post Experimental changes on Tax/Spend and Punish Criminals/Protect Rights Scales, by Voter Type

	<i>Labour</i> (<i>N=1308</i>)	<i>Cons</i> (<i>N=1265</i>)	<i>LibDem</i> (<i>575</i>)	<i>Other</i> (<i>296</i>)
Change in Tax/Services scale	.05	.00	.06	.02
Change in Punish Criminals/Protect Rights scale	.30	.11	.25	.14

Significant experimental changes in **bold**.

Increase in Tax/Services scale denotes stronger preference for higher taxes and more spent on services when confronted with the experimental stimulus.

Increase in Punish Criminals/Protect Rights denotes stronger preference for rights of the accused when confronted with the experimental stimulus.

Table 6. Full Logistic Regression Model of Labour Voting, Pre-experimental Exposure Measures of Tax/Spend and Authoritarian/Liberal Distances; Party Identification Variables Removed

	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Lab/Con difference in competence	.046	.008	.000	1.047
Distance R and Lab on tax/spend	-.189	.033	.000	.828
Distance R and Con on tax/spend	.111	.025	.000	1.118
Distance R and Lab on authorit/lib	-.080	.022	.000	.924
Distance R and Con on authorit/lib	.067	.025	.008	1.069
Blair liking ratings	.377	.022	.000	1.458
Howard liking ratings	-.086	.026	.001	.917
Kennedy liking ratings	-.166	.024	.000	.847
Economic perceptions	.107	.022	.000	1.112
Educational qualifications	-.139	.030	.000	.870
Constant	-1.797	.337	.000	.166

Nagelkerke R2=.59 N=3219 Percent correct=83.9

Table 7. Reduced Logistic Regression Model of Labour Voting; Pre-experimental Exposure Measures of Tax/Spend and Authoritarian/Liberal Distances Only

	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Distance R and Lab on tax/spend	-.376	.026	.000	.686
Distance R and Con on tax/spend	.235	.018	.000	1.265
Distance R and Lab on authorit/lib	-.219	.017	.000	.804
Distance R and Con on authorit/lib	.140	.020	.000	1.151
Constant	-.144	.093	.122	.866

Nagelkerke R2=.37

N=3294

Percent correct=74.7

Table 8. R² Values from Logistic Regression Models of Labour and Conservative Voting; Pre-experiment and Post-Experiment Measures of Tax/Spend and Authoritarian/Liberal Distances Only; by Experimental Treatment Group

<i>N</i>	<i>Experimental treatment</i>	<i>Lab</i>		<i>Con</i>	
		<i>PreE</i>	<i>PostE</i>	<i>PreE</i>	<i>PostE</i>
364	1. Control: R (Respondent) only	.34	.27	.53	.46
397	2. R + 'average voter'	.39	.35	.68	.59
350	3. R + 'party supporters'	.43	.42	.59	.52
351	4. R + named party leaders	.46	.40	.53	.50
364	5. R + leaders + party labels	.42	.35	.54	.47
374	6. R + 'parties in 1983'	.38	.32	.49	.46
368	7. R + 'parties in 1964'	.29	.25	.60	.55
357	8. R + 'parties in 2005'	.37	.32	.50	.41
369	9. R + 'supporters + leaders'	.38	.33	.54	.52
3294	All cases combined	.37	.33	.55	.49

Endnotes

1. For data, questionnaires, and technical information concerning the internet survey, see the BES website: www.essex.ac.uk/bes
2. Since the dependent variables (vote Labour yes/no and vote Conservative yes/no) in these analyses are 0-1 dichotomies, we employ logistic regression analysis to estimate model parameters (Long, 1997).

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