

Middle Alternatives Revisited: How the neither/nor Response Acts as a Way of Saying “I Don’t Know”?

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Abstract

A persistent problem in the design of bipolar attitude questions is whether or not to include a middle response alternative. On the one hand, it is reasonable to assume that people might hold opinions which are ‘neutral’ with regard to issues of public controversy. On the other, question designers suspect that offering a mid-point may attract respondents with no opinion, or those who lean to one side of an issue but do not wish to incur the cognitive costs required to determine a directional response. Existing research into the effects of offering a middle response alternative has predominantly used a split-ballot design, in which respondents are assigned to conditions which offer or omit a midpoint. While this body of work has been useful in demonstrating that offering or excluding a mid-point substantially influences the answers respondents provide, it does not offer any clear resolution to the question of which format yields more accurate data. In this paper, we use

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a different approach. We use follow-up probes administered to respondents who initially select the mid-point to determine whether they selected this alternative in order to indicate opinion neutrality, or to indicate that they do not have an opinion on the issue. We find the vast majority of responses turn out to be what we term 'face-saving don't knows' and that reallocating these responses from the mid-point to the don't know category significantly alters descriptive and multivariate inferences. Counter to the survey-satisficing perspective, we find that those with this tendency is greatest amongst those who express more interest in the topic area.

Keywords

middle alternatives, satisficing, neither/nor, don't know

Introduction

Attitudes have been defined as evaluations along a latent psychological dimension of preference about a particular object (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). From this perspective, the attitude is best conceptualized as a bipolar construct ranging from extremely negative through to extremely positive preferences, with a neutral midpoint along the continuum. This basic assumption about the underlying structure of attitudes underpins the methods typically used to measure and analyze them in survey research. Most survey attitude measures typically attempt to assess both the *direction* of the evaluation and its *intensity*, using response scales that capture these two dimensions simultaneously (Alwin 1992). Probably, the most widely used of this type of attitude measure is the bipolar response scale, in which respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with a statement intended to capture positive or negative aspects of the attitude object (Likert 1932). If implemented as their originator intended, Likert items should be administered as multi-item batteries relating to the topic, object, or issue of interest. However, resource constraints often mean that, in practice, only a small number of items can be used to assess an attitude domain and it is not at all uncommon to find social surveys and opinion polls using just a single item to gauge opinion on important areas of political controversy. This practice has heightened the need to better understand the cognitive strategies that people use to answer these types of survey questions to inform best practice in their design.

Central to the construction of bipolar response scales is the choice of whether to use an even or an odd number of response alternatives. If an odd number of alternatives is selected, it must be assumed that the midpoint of the response scale represents views which are genuinely neutral; that is to say, these must be substantive opinions that fall (approximately) at the midpoint of the underlying preference dimension. On the other hand, if an even number of response alternatives is chosen, the possibility of measuring neutral opinions which do exist in the population is excluded by design. This poses some difficult trade-offs for question designers and it is to this choice that we seek to contribute some clarity and guidance in this article. Of course, the question of how many response alternatives to include on a rating scale is one that has troubled researchers for many years and has received considerable attention in the literature on questionnaire design and measurement error (see Alwin 2007; Krosnick, Judd, and Wittenbrink 2005; Krosnick and Presser, forthcoming). Yet a lack of consensus persists, and practice in questionnaire design continues to vary widely.

The first obvious problem that arises if a middle response alternative is provided is that it is possible for respondents who are fatigued, or poorly motivated to complete the survey to select the middle alternative when they could, if pushed, give a directional response. Krosnick has termed this type of responding—in which respondents who “lean” in a particular direction on an issue but choose the midpoint to minimize cognitive costs—“satisficing” (Krosnick 1991). The possibility of satisficing among midpoint responders, however, must be pitted against the fact that neutrality is often an entirely reasonable position to take on many issues, so excluding a middle alternative by providing an even number of answer categories, may force genuinely neutral respondents to choose from among the directional answer categories. We refer to this as “forced directional” responding and it is the difficulty of minimizing satisficing without simultaneously promoting “forced directional” responses that makes the question of whether or not to include a middle response alternative so difficult to come to a satisfactory conclusion about.

Yet, there exists a third potential source of error that must be considered when deciding whether to offer a middle alternative, which has received considerably less attention in the existing literature. This is the possibility that respondents who do not hold an opinion on the issue at all will select the middle alternative rather than explicitly admitting their ignorance by selecting or volunteering “don’t know.” This type of socially desirable responding, which we refer to as a “hidden don’t know” response, if

evident at nontrivial levels, is likely to be particularly problematic for valid inference because it will lead to both overestimates of the degree of opinionation in the population and violation of the ordinality assumption that researchers typically invoke when analyzing bipolar response scales. A primary motivation of this article is to argue that, for many response scales that employ a “neither/nor” alternative as the midpoint, it is the “hidden don’t know” that is the primary threat to validity. Additionally, we seek to show that, counter to the satisficing perspective, it is those who are *most* interested in the topic area who are more likely to select the midpoint of an item when their true opinion cannot be described as neutral. This is because the decision to select the midpoint rather than admit ignorance is reflective of a social desirability bias and, as such, is to be found most often among individuals who believe they *should* have an opinion on matters of public interest. The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we review the existing literature on middle response alternatives, before describing our hypotheses, research design, and data. We then present the results of our statistical analyses before considering the implications of our findings for our understanding of the cognitive basis of midpoint responses and the optimal design of bipolar attitude items.

Why Do People Select Middle Alternatives?

Early studies by Rugg and Cantril (1944), Schuman and Presser (1981), Kalton, Roberts, and Holt (1980), and Bishop (1987) used split-ballot designs to evaluate the effects of offering versus omitting a middle response option for questions in which respondents must decide between competing policy proposals, and the midpoint provides an “in-between” alternative to the two competing end point options. For example, Schuman and Presser (1981; see also Presser and Schuman 1980) looked at middle alternatives which asked people if they were “middle of the road” politically (rather than left or right), if they thought marijuana laws in the future should be kept “the same as now” (rather than made more strict or less strict), and if the current level of U.S. foreign aid was “the right amount” (rather than too much or too little). The principal finding of these early experiments is broadly consistent and largely unsurprising. Offering a midpoint increases the proportion of respondents reporting opinions in the middle category (i.e., endorsing the “status quo” position), compared to when this alternative is not explicitly offered and interviewers are instructed to record volunteered midpoint responses. In other words, when the midpoint is

offered, respondents are more likely to report “neutral” attitudes than when it is omitted.

Schuman and Presser found little evidence that omitting the midpoint affected either the distribution of responses across the directional categories, or correlations between these outcomes and other variables in the data set. This suggested that the increase in neutral responses is drawn with approximately equal probability from across the remaining substantive answer categories. Ayidiya and McClendon (1990) obtained similar findings in a replication of Schuman and Presser’s experiments using a mail, self-completion design. However, Kalton et al. (1980) and Bishop (1987) found that offering respondents a middle alternative *did* affect the distribution of responses across the remaining categories, and altered correlations between the variables of interest and a range of background characteristics, though not in a substantial way, nor in a consistent direction. While clearly demonstrating that the decision over whether or not to include a middle response alternative significantly affects the distribution of the data obtained, these split-ballot studies tell us rather little about the mechanisms that cause midpoint responding and, as a consequence, which of the two formats should be preferred by question designers. This is because the differences in marginal frequencies across offered and omitted conditions are equally well accounted for by (a) truly neutral respondents being forced to select a substantive response in the omitted condition (*forced directional* response), (b) respondents with a true substantive position selecting the midpoint in the offered condition (*satisficing* response), or (c) some combination of (a) and (b).

An additional limitation of these split-ballot studies for guiding best practice today is that they employ “substantive” midpoints. That is to say, the midpoint refers to an actual position on the issue in question, such as “keep things about the same,” rather than the “neither/nor” construction that is so ubiquitous in contemporary survey research. And it is far from obvious that the lessons learned from questions with substantive midpoints should generalize in any straightforward way to the more common “neither/nor” format. For, although there is a degree of ambiguity about what “keep things about the same” might mean in exact policy terms, it is certainly not a response that can be interpreted as *semantically equivalent* to having no opinion on the issue. The “neither/nor” label that is now applied to the vast majority of middle response alternatives in current survey practice is, on the other hand, logically consistent with both opinion neutrality and having no opinion on the issue in question. For instance, if I do not have an opinion on the job performance of the Prime Minister, it is undoubtedly true to say that

I neither agree nor disagree with the statement “the Prime Minister is doing a good job.” “I neither agree, nor disagree” with the statement would also, of course, be an accurate response if my true opinion were that the Prime Minister is doing neither a good job, nor a bad job but is performing somewhere in between these two descriptors. And herein lies a major potential flaw in the design of the “neither/nor” midpoint. While analysts almost universally treat responses to these types of question as having ordinal (and sometimes interval) properties, it is likely that, for many items, the neither/nor midpoint actually represents a mix of both neutral and no opinion responses, in proportions that are unknown. The negative consequences for valid inference, if this is the case, are obvious.

And, indeed, there is some evidence from existing research to support the hypothesis that midpoint responding may be used as a socially acceptable way of saying “I don’t know.” Split-ballot studies have found midpoint responding to be associated with the tendency to select or volunteer a “don’t know” response; when a midpoint was offered, the proportion of respondents reporting “don’t know” decreased, and vice versa (Kalton et al. 1980; Presser and Schuman 1980; Rugg and Cantrill 1944). This pattern suggests that substantive midpoints are likely to attract people whose opinions are relatively uncrystallized, or people “who having no opinion on the issue, find it easier to choose a seemingly non-committal position than to say “don’t know” (Schuman and Presser 1981:71). While the magnitude of this effect has generally been found to be small (cf. a nonsignificant 2 percent difference, on average, between offered and omitted conditions in Schuman and Presser’s study), it seems reasonable to assume that, for the reasons outlined above, the difference will be substantially greater when the label provided for the midpoint is logically consistent with having no opinion, as is the case with the “neither/nor” formulation.

Other empirical approaches to establishing the optimal number of scale points for attitude rating scales have focused on the estimation of reliability and validity coefficients for response scales of different lengths (Alwin 2007; O’ Muircheartaigh et al. 2000; see Krosnick and Presser, forthcoming for a review). Most prominently, Alwin (2002, 2007) has shown that, compared to 2-point scales, 3-point scales have significantly poorer reliability (see also Andrews 1984), a pattern which he attributes to the uncertainty induced by the introduction of a potentially ambiguous midpoint. However, the 5-point scales he analyzed yielded similar reliability to 4-point scales, while 7-point scales had the lowest reliability of all. Because this approach is based on the analysis of large item pools and empirical estimation of reliability and validity, it is a powerful method

of determining the most appropriate number of response alternatives when considered in the aggregate. However, by the same token, because the emphasis is on the analysis of covariances as the means of determining the most appropriate response format, little is learned directly about the psychological mechanisms which lead individual respondents to choose the midpoint.

We have argued, then, that the split-ballot design is of limited value for understanding the psychological mechanisms which lead to the observed differences in marginal frequencies across experimental conditions. A more direct approach to addressing this question has been developed and applied in a recent study by Malhotra et al. (2009). They seek to identify the optimal number of response alternatives for a range of attitude items by examining changes in validity coefficients following the administration of “branching” follow-up questions to an initial response provided on a 3-point scale. Branching questions involve two steps: respondents are first asked to report the direction of their attitude (e.g., favor, oppose, neither favor nor oppose) and in a follow-up question, they are then asked to report the extremity of their response, or if they lean one way or the other for those who initially select the middle alternative. Malhotra et al. found that validity was highest when branching questions were used to obtain 7-point scales and when respondents selecting an end point at the first step were subsequently branched into three response options. Branching the midpoint into directional alternatives was found to yield no significant gains in criterion validity. Additionally, when midpoint respondents, who subsequently said they were leaning in a particular direction in follow-up questions, were pooled with initial end point respondents who selected the least extreme follow-up response, validity was compromised, leading the authors to conclude that “respondents who placed themselves at the midpoint belonged there” (Malhotra et al. 2009:318). This conclusion, however, only considers the possibility that initial midpoint responders are satisficing. It does not rule out the possibility that those who initially select the neither/nor alternative are doing so as a way of saying “don’t know.” Given the existing evidence to suggest that substantive midpoints may attract don’t knows and the *prima facie* plausibility that this tendency will be greater for “neither/nor” midpoints, our first hypothesis becomes:

Hypothesis 1: The percentage of respondents who select a “neither/nor” alternative but indicate that this denotes a “don’t know” response in a subsequent branching question will be greater than zero.

Because we have no a priori expectation from the existing literature about the likely proportion of hidden don't knows for each question, Hypothesis 1 is specified as a test of the simple null hypothesis that the true value is zero in the population.

Our theoretical model specifies that respondents who have no opinion on an issue will often choose the "neither/nor" alternative rather than select or volunteer a "don't know" is essentially a matter of self-presentation; one can select what looks like a substantive position and avoid a public admission of ignorance, while still selecting a response which is logically consistent with one's actual position on the issue. As we do not directly observe the extent to which respondents answer questions in a socially desirable manner, we must test this hypothesis indirectly, as a function of another variable which we assume to be a proximal cause of socially desirable responding. Because holding an opinion on issues of public debate is likely to be most socially desirable among those who are (or claim to be) interested and engaged in the topic area, our second hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 2: For those with no opinion on an issue, selecting the "neither/nor" alternative rather than volunteering a "don't know" response at the outset will be most prevalent among those who report more interest in the substantive area to which the question relates.

The conditioning premise in Hypothesis 2, "for those with no opinion on an issue," is crucial because it is also clear that those who express interest in a particular topic domain will, all things equal, be more likely to have an opinion about an issue within it. However, *conditional on having no opinion on a particular issue*, we should expect psychological processes of self-presentation to militate against volunteering a "don't know" response and toward selecting the "neither/nor" midpoint among those who report greater interest. This expectation is supported by a number of existing studies which have found overreporting of civic behavior and voting (Cassel 2003; McCutcheon et al. 2003; Presser 1984; Vavrek 2006) and the reporting of attitudes on fictitious issues (Sturgis and Smith 2010) to be highest among those who report being interested in politics.

Data and Research Design

The data for this study were collected as part of the Ipsos-MORI General Public Omnibus (GPO) survey. The GPO is a multistage, face-to-face interview survey, covering a broad range of topics with a geographical coverage

of mainland Britain. At the first stage, a regionally stratified sample of 210 parliamentary constituencies is randomly selected. At stage 2, a government ward is randomly selected within each sampled constituency. Finally, 10 respondents are selected purposively within each ward to match population marginals on age, sex, housing tenure, and working status. Fieldwork was conducted during April and May 2008 ($n = 3,113$). The design is not random but achieves a broad geographic coverage and matches the general population closely on a range of characteristics. Ipsos-MORI does not record refusals data, so it is not possible to report the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) refusal rate (http://www.aapor.org/uploads/standarddefs_4.pdf).

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In condition 1, they were administered the following question:

1. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the performance of the European Commission?
 - (a) *very satisfied* (b) *fairly satisfied* (c) *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied* (d) *fairly dissatisfied* (e) *very dissatisfied*

In condition 2, respondents were asked the following question:

2. How important or unimportant do you think it is for Britain to be at the forefront of developments in nanotechnology?
 - (a) *very important* (b) *fairly important* (c) *neither important nor unimportant* (d) *not very important* (e) *not at all important*

In condition 3, respondents were administered the following question:

3. On balance, the advantages of genetically modified foods outweigh any dangers
 - (a) *strongly agree* (b) *agree* (c) *neither agree nor disagree* (d) *disagree* (e) *strongly disagree*

Printed cards containing the response alternatives were shown to respondents to aid them in formulating a response. “Don’t know” was not included as an explicit response alternative on the show cards but, if respondents offered this answer (or similar), interviewers coded it as a “don’t know.” Interviewers were not instructed to probe for a substantive answer if a “don’t know” response was offered voluntarily. We selected these 3

items because they relate to low-salience issues, so comparatively high proportions of the public were likely to have no opinion on them. They also cover the three main response dimensions upon which response scales are generally based in contemporary survey practice: agreement versus disagreement; importance versus unimportance; and satisfaction versus dissatisfaction. Any respondent selecting the “neither/nor” response alternative was administered a follow-up question asking them to clarify whether their response was meant to indicate genuine neutrality, or that they do not have an opinion on the issue:

1. Which of the following statements best describes why you (neither agree nor disagree, are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, think it is neither important nor unimportant) that the advantages of genetically modified (GM) foods outweigh any dangers/with the performance of the European Commission/for Britain to be at the forefront of developments in nanotechnology?
 - (a) I don't really have an opinion on this issue.
 - (b) I have an opinion which is right in the middle on this issue.
 - (c) Neither of the above.

Respondents selecting option 3 “neither of the above” were asked to state, in their own words, what led them to select the neither/nor alternative and their verbatim responses were recorded by the interviewer. These were then coded by Ipsos-MORI's team of trained coders to a frame of discrete codes. In addition to a range of standard demographic questions, respondents were asked to state their level of interest in politics (for those in condition 1) or in science (for those in conditions 2 and 3). The order in which the interest questions were administered relative to the three issue items was also randomized across groups (with half the respondents in each receiving the interest question first and half receiving it second). Analysis showed there to be no order effect on any of the 3 items, so the order conditions were combined.

Results

Table 1 shows the raw marginal frequencies for each of the three questions. The important thing to note about Table 1 is the high proportion of both “don't know” responses and middle alternatives, with only 41 percent to 58 percent of respondents providing substantive responses across the 3 items.¹ These, then, were clearly quite low-salience issues for the British

Table 1. Marginal Frequencies for the 3 Items.

European commission	Very Satisfied	Fairly Satisfied	Neither/Nor	Fairly Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Don't Know	Total
Nanotechnology	11 (1.1%) Very important	130 (12.6%) Fairly important	312 (30.3%) Neither/nor	142 (13.8%) Not very important	140 (13.6%) Not at all important	294 (28.6%) Don't know	1,029 1,031
Gene modification	30 (2.8%) Strongly agree	184 (17.5%) Agree	289 (27.4%) Neither/Nor	234 (22.3%) Disagree	123 (11.7%) Strongly disagree	192 (18.2%) Don't know	1,053
	240 (23.3%)	272 (26.4%)	125 (12.1%)	56 (5.4%)	26 (2.5%)	312 (30.3%)	

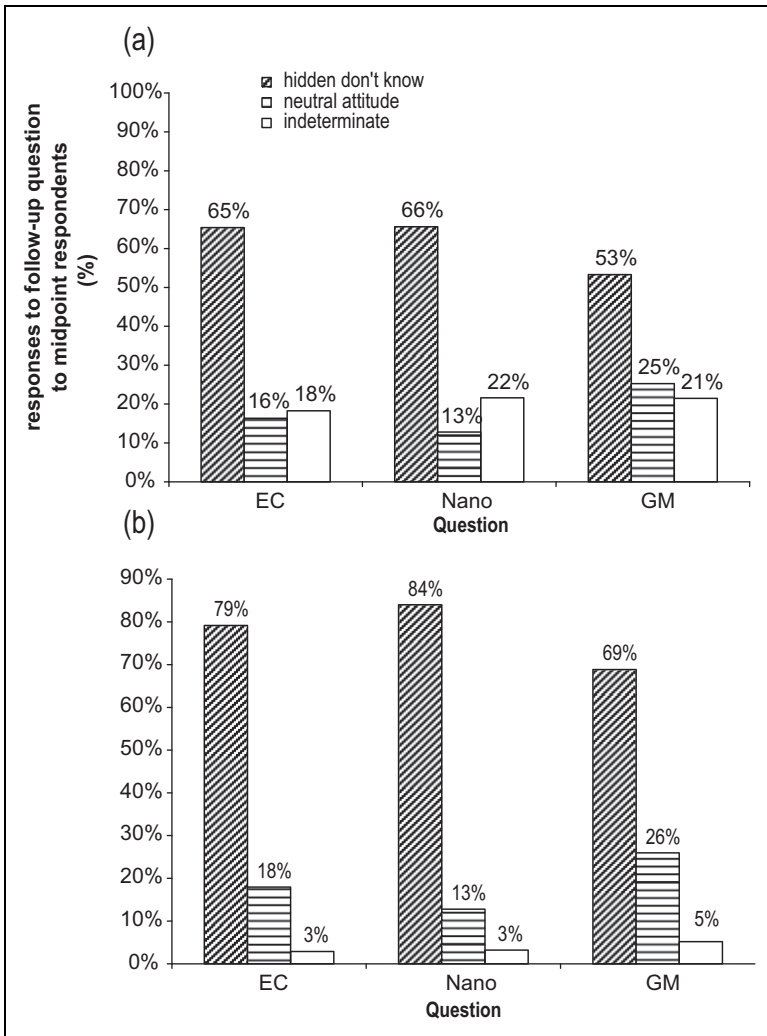


Figure 1. Distribution of initial midpoint responses after (a) the follow-up probe (b) the follow-up probe and redistribution of “neither of the above” responses.

public at this point in time, even though they were of considerable interest to academic scholars and policy makers.

What proportion of the middle alternatives on these questions represent genuinely neutral positions on the underlying preference dimension? Figure 1a

shows the breakdown of responses to the follow-up question administered to all respondents who initially selected the midpoint. The results are striking; on all three questions, the clear majority of midpoint responses actually turn out to indicate that the respondent has no opinion on the issue. Only 16 percent, 13 percent, and 25 percent of initial midpoints on the 3 items, respectively, are maintained to be truly “neutral” when respondents are asked directly what their response was intended to indicate. And these figures include in the base all those respondents who selected “neither of the above” to the initial follow-up probe.

When asked to say in their own words why they chose the “neither/nor” alternative, if not for either of these two reasons, the majority gave responses which indicated that they did not, in fact, have an opinion on the issue. For instance, on the GM item, 74 percent of these respondents provided verbatim answers which were assigned the following codes:

- I don’t have sufficient information (13 respondents).
- I have no interest (1 respondent).
- What they do is irrelevant to me/does not affect my life (3).
- I don’t know (25).

While only 11 percent provided verbatim responses which indicated that they held neutral attitudes:

- A balance between some good and some bad/depends on the issue (3).
- Does not have Britain’s interests at heart (3).

The remaining verbatim responses, which did not provide sufficient information to be coded as either “no opinion” or “neutral,” were allocated the code “indeterminate.”² Figure 1b shows the final distribution of midpoint responses after reallocation of these second follow-up respondents; between three quarters and nine-tenths of initial “neither/nor” responses now turn out to conceal nonattitudes, while only around one or two in ten are genuinely neutral opinions, strongly supporting Hypothesis 1. Figure 1 clearly shows that the raw distributions in Table 1 substantially overestimate the degree of opinion neutrality in the population and, as a corollary, underestimate by a commensurate amount the true extent of nonattitudes on all three issues.

In addition to univariate estimates, it is important to consider the implications of these findings for more explanatory multivariate analyses,

Table 2. Comparison of Ordinal Logistic Regression Models Predicting Satisfaction With the EC Before and After Reallocation of “Hidden Don’t Knows”.

	Model 1, Prior to Recoding Hidden Don’t Knows		Model 2, After Recoding Hidden Don’t Knows	
	B	SE	B	SE
Threshold#1	-1.74**	.74	-0.40	1.04
Threshold#2	1.00	.62	2.56***	.96
Threshold#3	3.02***	.64	3.10***	.95
Threshold#4	4.06***	.65	4.42***	.97
Male	0.30*	.14	0.18	.17
Age	0.06***	.02	0.10***	.03
Age squared	-0.0004*	.0001	0.0008	.0002
Political interest	0.12	.06	0.11	.08
Degree	-0.06	.25	-0.07	.29
Other qualification	0.28	.17	0.22	.22
Social grade	-0.05	.06	-0.05	.08
Longstanding illness	0.14	.19	0.12	.22

Note. Coefficients are logits; $n = 735$ (model 1); $n = 479$ (model 2); standard errors estimated using Taylor-series linearization; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; Source: Ipsos MORI general population omnibus survey.

in which bipolar response scales are often deployed, and which treat “neither/nor” responses as the midpoint of an ordinal scale. Table 2 presents the coefficients and standard errors from ordered logit models predicting attitude toward the EC, before and after reallocation of “hidden don’t knows”.³ There are a number of differences in the magnitude and significance of the coefficients across the two models that would lead to quite different substantive interpretations about the precursors of attitudes toward the European Commission. Most notably, men and those more interested in politics are significantly more positive about the EC in model 1 but not in model 2. Partly, this is due to the fact that the standard errors are somewhat larger in model 2, as a result of the increased number of don’t know responses that are dropped from the analysis in this model. However, the difference in sample size does not appear to be the only factor underpinning the differences, as there are also some sizable discrepancies in the magnitude of coefficient point estimates between the two models. Whatever the reasons for the differences, however, it remains clear that standard analytical practices would yield rather

Table 3. Distributions of Political/Scientific Interest Across “Initial” and “Hidden Don’t Know” Response Categories.

	Not at All Interested	Not Very Interested	Neither/Nor	Fairly Interested	Very Interested	Total	Chi-Square Test of Independence
E.C.							
Initial don't know	85 (28.9%)	90 (30.6%)	32 (10.9%)	77 (26.2%)	10 (3.4%)	294	18 (df = 4), p = .001
Hidden don't know	47 (19.1%)	57 (23.2%)	30 (12.2%)	95 (38.6%)	17 (6.9%)	246	
G.M.							
Initial don't know	64 (34.8%)	48 (26.1%)	28 (15.2%)	38 (20.7%)	6 (3.3%)	184	26 (df = 4), p < .001
Hidden don't know	31 (14.5%)	57 (26.6%)	48 (22.4%)	61 (28.5%)	17 (7.9%)	214	
Nanotechnology							
Initial don't know	82 (26.5%)	95 (30.7%)	34 (11%)	78 (25.2%)	20 (6.5%)	309	8.2 (df = 4), p = .086
Hidden don't know	19 (17.6%)	29 (26.9%)	19 (17.6%)	36 (33.3%)	5 (4.6%)	108	

different substantive interpretations depending on how the “neither/nor” midpoint is coded.

Thus far, we have shown that the vast majority of “neither/nor” responses on all 3 items appear, on closer examination, to be reflective of holding no opinion, rather than of opinion neutrality. We argued earlier that this phenomenon should be anticipated, on the grounds that many individuals may regard the admission of ignorance on matters of public policy as socially embarrassing and, hence, will select the “neither/nor” alternative as a face-saving way of saying “don’t know.” To test the proposed social desirability mechanism as specified in Hypothesis 2, Table 3 presents the distribution of interest in politics (for the EC item) and science (for the nanotechnology and GM items)⁴ for initial and hidden don’t know responses, respectively.

For all 3 items, the proportion of “fairly” and “very” interested respondents is higher and the proportion of “not at all” and “not very” interested respondents is lower for the “hidden don’t know” than it is for the “initial” don’t know” category, although for the nanotechnology item, the difference is marginally nonsignificant at the 95 percent level of confidence. Counter to what a survey-satisficing explanation of midpoint responding would predict, then, hidden don’t know responses are *more* prevalent among those who claim to be more interested in the topic domain, confirming Hypothesis 2.

A reasonable objection to the conclusion that more interested respondents select the “neither/nor” midpoint in substantial numbers as a face-saving way of saying “don’t know” is that we did not explicitly offer “don’t know” as a response alternative. If respondents volunteered a “don’t know” answer, interviewers were able and, indeed, instructed to record it. However, it is possible that what we are seeing is respondents, not so much avoiding saying don’t know, as selecting the offered alternative which comes closest to their true position. This explanation would also fit plausibly with the associations we have observed between “hidden don’t know” responding and interest in politics/science, on the grounds that respondents with greater interest in the topic might be more likely to stick to the interview protocol (i.e., select one of the response alternatives offered on the show card). To test this alternative account, we readministered the EC and GM questions to a fresh sample of the Ipsos-MORI general population omnibus⁵ but this time, a random half of respondents were offered an explicit “don’t know” alternative on the show card, while the other half were not. Marginal distributions before and after reallocation of “hidden don’t knows” across conditions are shown for the EC item in Table 4 and, for the GM item, in Table 5.

Table 4. Marginal Distribution for Satisfaction With EC for Items With and Without Explicit “Don’t Knows”

Question Version	Very/Fairly Satisfied	Neither/Nor	Fairly/Very Dissatisfied	Don’t Knows	Total
Before reallocating middle alternatives					
No explicit don’t knows	76 (13.6%)	138 (24.7%)	211 (37.7%)	134 (24%)	559
Explicit don’t knows	46 (9.4%)	117 (23.9%)	174 (35.5%)	153 (31.2%)	490
After reallocating middle alternatives					
No explicit don’t knows	76 (13.6%)	28 (5%)	211 (37.7%)	244 (43.6%)	559
Explicit don’t knows	46 (9.4%)	30 (6%)	174 (35.5%)	240 (49.2%)	490

Table 5. Distribution for Benefits and Dangers of GM Item for Items With and Without Explicit “Don’t Knows”

Question Version	Strongly Agree/Agree	Neither/Nor	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	Don’t Knows	Total
Before reallocating middle alternatives					
No explicit don’t knows	99 (19.6%)	139 (27.6%)	156 (31%)	110 (21.8%)	504
Explicit don’t knows	110 (20.7%)	133 (25%)	170 (32%)	118 (22.2%)	531
After reallocating middle alternatives					
No explicit don’t knows	99 (19.6%)	39 (7.7%)	156 (31%)	210 (41.7%)	504
Explicit don’t knows	110 (20.7%)	41 (7.7%)	170 (32%)	118 (39.5%)	531

Table 4 shows that, for the EC item, although offering an explicit “don’t know” does increase the “don’t know” rate by 7 percent, it has no effect on the rate of “neither/nor” responding, either before or after reallocation of “hidden don’t knows.” In fact, the increase in the “don’t know” rate in the offered condition comes entirely from across the substantive categories in the omitted condition. This suggests that, rather than reducing the rate of “hidden don’t knows,” offering an explicit “don’t know” might increase the rate of satisficing, by drawing respondents who are able to provide a substantive answer toward the cognitively easier “don’t know” alternative. As we argued earlier, of course, it is also possible that respondents with no opinion who select the “don’t know” in the offered condition, are (in counterfactual terms) randomly selecting substantive responses in the omitted condition (Converse 1964). Either way, we can be confident that, for this item, explicitly offering a “don’t know” alternative does not reduce the rate of “hidden don’t knows.” For the GM item (Table 5), the same is true—the inclusion of an explicit don’t know option has no effect on the rate of “neither/nor” responding, either before or after reallocation of “hidden don’t knows,” although for this item, there is no evidence to suggest that it increases satisficing or reduces random responding relative to the omitted condition.

Discussion

The bipolar response scale with five or seven answer categories and a “neither/nor” midpoint, though by no means the only method used for measuring attitudes, remains one of the most prevalent tools for measuring social and political attitudes across the social sciences. Prominent surveys which have implemented this question format in recent years include, but are not limited to: the British Social Attitudes Survey; the British Household Panel Survey; the British Crime Survey; the British Election Study; the American National Election Studies; the General Social Survey; and major multinational studies including the European Social Survey; the World Values Survey; and the International Social Survey Program. Yet, despite their ubiquity in current survey practice, there has long been a lack of understanding about the psychological mechanisms respondents employ in answering them. As a consequence, it has not been clear exactly how these items should be designed and implemented to minimize random and systematic errors of measurement. The reason that this lacuna has persisted for so long in the survey methodological literature is, we have argued, that the split-ballot research designs

that have traditionally been implemented to delineate the various competing sources of error do not provide sufficient leverage on the key question of *why* people select midpoints.

There are at least three ways in which respondents might select a response category on a bipolar response scale in a manner that does not reflect their true psychological state. First, “satisficers” hold an opinion but select the midpoint to avoid the cognitive costs of selecting the most appropriate directional alternative. Second, respondents who hold genuinely neutral opinions but are not offered a midpoint are forced to select from among the available directional categories—“forced directional” responses. And third, respondents who do not have an opinion on the issue at all but select the midpoint, or from among the directional categories, as a way of saying “don’t know” without appearing to admit ignorance to the interviewer. The split-ballot design, in which respondents are randomly assigned to receive items omitting or offering a midpoint, is not well suited to identifying the relative contributions made by each of these mechanisms, at least insofar as the design has been implemented to date.

A recent methodological innovation by Malhotra et al. (2009) has advanced our understanding of how to optimize the design of bipolar response scales considerably. Instead of the standard split-ballot approach, Malhotra et al. use “branching” questions to take respondents from an initial broad answer category to a more refined directional response, or to maintain their initial position. They then compare validity coefficients from the initial to the branched versions of the questions to determine the optimal number of response categories for the item in question. Using this approach across a pool of eight target attitude measures, they found that validity coefficients were not improved by branching respondents who initially selected the midpoint to the directional responses on either side. From this they concluded that respondents who select the midpoint “belong there.” As we noted earlier, however, this conclusion does not consider the possibility that the initial “neither/nor” midpoint might also act as a way of saying “don’t know.”

In this study, we have applied a variant of Malhotra et al.’s branching method to test this hypothesis directly. We have found that, for the 3 items considered, the vast majority of respondents who initially selected the “neither/nor” alternative on a 5-point item selected the “I don’t have an opinion on this issue” option when subsequently asked why they had chosen the midpoint. Only a small minority selected the alternative option, denoting true opinion neutrality, “I have an opinion which is right in the middle on this issue.” Unsurprisingly, reallocating the “hidden don’t know” responses

from the midpoint to the “don’t know” category substantially altered marginal and multivariate distributions for all 3 items. Our contention is that the response distributions of these variables prior to branching the midpoints are less reflective of the underlying preference distribution than is the case after the “hidden don’t knows” have been allocated away from the midpoint. However, because we do not have criterion variables in our data set by which the validity of these responses can be evaluated empirically, we can speak of bias in the unbranched data only by assumption—these measures are biased because they contain responses which, upon closer investigation, are revealed not to be located at the midpoint of an ordinal scale. While we believe this assumption to be both parsimonious and plausible, additional work could usefully be undertaken to assess the impact of the branching procedure applied to midpoints on criterion validity coefficients.

A novel contribution of this article is our demonstration that the motivation to employ a “face-saving don’t know” response strategy appears to derive from a desire to avoid social embarrassment among respondents who feel that they should have an opinion on important issues. Thus, and counter to what the satisficing framework would predict, the “face-saving don’t know” is found most frequently among those who express greater interest in the topic area.

An important limitation to the generality of our conclusions is the fact that we have focused on a small number of low-salience issues. Selecting low-salience issues was a deliberate strategy in order to obtain sufficient numbers of respondents with no opinion on each issue. On issues with which the public are more familiar, the proportion of true don’t knows and, therefore, of “hidden don’t knows” in the population would very likely be smaller and the threat to valid inference concomitantly lower. To adopt Converse’s terminology with regard to his “black-and-white” model of public opinion, these items should, therefore, be considered as “limiting cases,” which act as a proof of concept rather than being typical or representative of bipolar response scales in general (Converse 1964, 2000). An important avenue of future research will be to determine the extent to which our findings generalize to a broader range of issues that are higher in the public consciousness.

Be that as it may, it is not at all uncommon for the public to be surveyed about matters of which they are only dimly aware. Indeed, one of the few things that we know with some certainty about public opinion, after decades of empirical research, is that the majority of the public are poorly informed about and little interested in politics and science

(Allum et al. 2008; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Miller 2001). Our research is, therefore, of direct relevance to the many surveys which seek to elicit public preferences on more peripheral areas of public policy and debate.

What, then, do our findings imply for the design of bipolar response scales? First, that it is important to include a midpoint, because a substantial minority of people do appear to hold attitudinal positions which are genuinely neutral, in the sense of being located at the midpoint of a underlying preference dimension. Omitting a middle alternative would result in such individuals being forced to select a response alternative that does not reflect their true attitudinal position and, as a result, reduce item reliability and validity by forcing respondents with genuinely neutral positions to select from amongst the available directional alternatives.

However, while a midpoint should be included, whether it is most appropriately labeled “neither/nor” is highly questionable. Because neither agreeing, nor disagreeing with a statement is logically consistent with both opinion neutrality and having no opinion, this label incorporates an inherent ambiguity that can only be resolved by the administration of follow-up probes. These are time-consuming to administer and, therefore, costly. Nonetheless, our results show that the additional cost of administering branching questions from the midpoint into a “don’t know” category is likely to be effective in meeting the key objective of any survey—valid inference. The intuitively appealing recourse of including an explicit “don’t know” alternative does not appear to solve the problem, for while this did serve to increase the frequency of “don’t know” responses, it had no discernable effect on the rate of “hidden don’t knows.” Another possible resolution of the problem we have identified here may lie in using a label for the midpoint which is more consistent with the way in which question designers would like respondents to interpret it. We recommend this as a particularly fruitful avenue for future research.

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Notes

1. When the GM item was administered as part of the 2003 British Social Attitude Survey, the response distribution was 14 percent agree, 37 percent neither/nor, 33 percent disagree, and 16 percent don't know.
2. The full distribution of verbatim codes for all 3 items is provided in the Appendix A (see Online Appendix A which can be found at <http://smr.sagepub.com/supplemental/>).
3. Various model specifications could be used for this demonstration, including ordinary least squares and multinomial logit. We have chosen ordered logit because this seems most suitable, given the distribution of the outcome. However, the basic point that there are substantial differences between the coefficients before and after reallocation of hidden don't knows is consistent across all three link functions. These are available from the corresponding author upon request.
4. How interested would you say you are in politics/science? (1) *very interested* (2) *fairly interested* (3) *neither interested nor uninterested* (4) *not very interested* (5) *not at all interested*.
5. Data were collected during October 2008 ($n = 2,084$).

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