

Vote Overreporting and a Survey Experiment: The Case of the Taiwan National Elections*

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The misreporting of voter turnout, prevalent in survey data across the world, has received comparatively little attention anywhere apart from in some western countries. This study evaluates the use of questions specifically designed to mitigate the level of vote overreporting for the 2012 national elections in Taiwan. After a theoretical examination of social desirability and memory failure, the two primary causes of misreporting, we present the results of a split-question experiment featuring two questions designed to mitigate overreporting. While the findings reveal that the experiment with changes to the questionnaire context was far from successful because of a low reported turnout for the control question, it is the case that, as hypothesized, reported voter turnout differs vastly among

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the different questions, with the question mitigating for social desirability resulting in higher figures than that for memory failure.

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Scholars of behavioral studies are always faced with a major question of credibility in survey-based research — that is, the validity of the responses gathered from sampled individuals. This problem is particularly serious in surveys on whether respondents voted in previous elections. Research on electoral turnout and voter choice depends heavily on self-reported behavior, but it is generally found that a certain proportion of respondents do not accurately report their voting behavior (Belli *et al.*, 2006, 1999; Bernstein *et al.*, 2001; Blair & Imai, 2012; Cassel & Sigelman, 2001; Wu, 2006). In particular, a significant cause of errors in survey research on voting behavior arises from more respondents claiming to have voted in post-election interviews than have actually cast ballots.

Unsurprisingly, vote overreporting leads to misleading conclusions when unaccounted for in studies. Much of the scholarly work tests models of electoral behavior based on survey measurements containing a relatively large amount of error. While substantial, the effects of vote misreporting vary across different investigations. Taking American elections as an example, the discrepancy between the self-reported and validated turnout rates ranges from approximately 12% to 25%, and the gap has remained fairly stable across time (Fullerton *et al.*, 2007; Presser & Traugott, 1992). Furthermore, the evidence consistently demonstrates that overreporting voters are more likely than actual voters to claim that they voted for the winner (Atkeson, 1999; Wright, 1993).

Yet despite the detrimental effects of the overreporting of voting behavior, research into its causes and extent has been limited. The topic has only been researched empirically in a few western countries (Karp & Brockington, 2005; Rendall *et al.*, 1999; Swaddle & Heath, 1989), and

only the United States has been subjected to systematic quantitative analysis (cf. Atkeson, 1999; Belli *et al.*, 1999; Blair & Imai, 2012; Burden, 2000; Selb & Munzert, 2013). By contrast, systematic analysis of overreporting in newly democratized countries remains scarce (Mo *et al.*, 1991; Wu, 2006). To mitigate these deficiencies, this study addresses the theme of vote overreporting in Taiwan.

Overreporting in Taiwan

One reason why we believe that vote misreporting in Taiwan is worthy of research is that it can be used as a proxy measure of the health of democracy in a society. After all, the intentions and voting behavior of the public are important measures of the level of democratization. This is largely because the ability of eligible voters to play crucial, decisive roles by casting ballots in free, fair, and open elections is central to the survival of democracy (Lipset, 1981). We are interested to see how far Taiwan lives up to this democratic ideal.

The degree of vote misreporting in Taiwan is considerable. As revealed in election data, many more Taiwanese respondents report that they voted for the winning ticket than actual voter data suggest. In the 2008 presidential election, in which the opposition Kuomintang's (KMT's) Ma Ying-Jeou and Siew Wan-Chang defeated Frank Hsieh Chang-Ting and Su Tseng-Chang of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), actual data show a 16.90% difference in votes received between the two tickets, while self-reported data from the Taiwan Election and Democratization Study (TEDS) show a much larger 26.38% difference. The discrepancies by party candidate are illustrated in Table 1.

While this example comes from the 2008 presidential election in Taiwan, the problem of overreporting has persisted with little abatement in subsequent elections. In the presidential election of 2012, systematic misreporting also features prominently and a similar trend can be detected. The extent of the problem is shown in Table 2. Respondents

Table 1.

Actual and Reported Votes in the 2008 Presidential Election

	Actual Votes (%)	Reported Votes
Frank Hsieh Chang-Ting and Su Tseng-Chang	41.55	752 (36.81%)
Ma Ying-Jeou and Siew Wan-Chang	58.45	1,291 (63.19%)
<i>N</i>		2,043 (100.00%)
Forget		52
Cast void ballot		18
Refuse to answer		225
Do not know		13
Did not vote		308

Source. Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, <<http://www.esc.nccu.edu.tw/>> and TEDS 2008P.

tended to report that they voted for the candidates of one of the two main parties, the KMT or the DPP, with a further bias toward the winning KMT. Despite there being a difference of only 6 percentage points between the KMT and DPP candidates in terms of actual votes received, overreporting by voters enlarged the difference to 18.65 percentage points in the self-reported data.

Table 2.

Actual and Reported Votes in the 2012 Presidential Election

	Actual Votes (%)	Reported Votes
Tsai Ing-Wen and Su Jia-Quan	45.63	1,030 (39.21%)
Ma Ying-Jeou and Wu Dun-Yi	51.60	1,520 (57.86%)
James Soong and Lin Rui-Hsiung	2.77	77 (2.93%)
<i>N</i>		2,627 (100.00%)
Forget		23
Cast void ballot		9
Refuse to answer		302
Do not know		16
Did not vote		363

Source. From Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, <<http://www.esc.nccu.edu.tw/>> and TEDS 2012.

However, this phenomenon of fewer respondents reporting that they voted for a losing party than actually did so does not seem to affect the People First Party's (PFP's) candidates, James Soong and Lin Rui-Hsiung. One possible reason for this is that PFP supporters are so solid that they are unwilling to tell white lies about their vote decisions. In general, however, the issue of overreporting has not improved at all in recent years, and it continues to plague survey research. The following section presents the cause of such overreporting and how we can mitigate its effects in quantitative electoral research.

Motives for Overreporting

Two theories about the cause of misreporting have been generally suggested by the academic community.¹ The first is the theory of “perceived social desirability.” Although respondents know they did not vote, they say that they did so in order to present themselves in a socially desirable light (Karp & Brockington, 2005). Voting is seen as a civic duty for all responsible citizens, so not voting is something one would avoid acknowledging as a “face-saving measure” (Belli *et al.*, 1999).

It is largely due to social desirability motives that misreporting voters are more likely than actual voters to claim that they voted for the winner (Atkeson, 1999; Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010a; Wright, 1993). This is because people prefer to be perceived as part of the political mainstream rather than the fringe. To reduce the effects of social desirability on potential misreporting, the existing literature has focused on how questions can be reworded to reduce the incentive to give a dishonest answer. The “meaning” of an undesirable response can be altered so that it would not be regarded as unfavorable, or even be considered

¹In addition to social desirability and memory failure, another possible explanation for misreporting is acquiescence; i.e., some respondents might say they have voted when they have not due to acquiescence response bias (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010b, pp. 40–41). However, the evidence thus far leans toward the lack of a relationship between acquiescence and overreporting (Abelson *et al.*, 1992).

positive (Bishop *et al.*, 1984; Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010a). Some research underlines the need to provide respondents with valid, highly justifiable excuses for not voting before they are given the chance to respond. By shifting the respondent's attention to reasons for not voting, this method provides a "face-saving measure" that removes any need for social desirability concerns (Belli *et al.*, 2006; Lindsay & Johnson, 1989; Zaragoza & Lane, 1994).

The second theory is that of simple memory failure. Voters tend to forget for whom they voted, if they can recall voting at all. To detect misreporting stemming from memory lapse, Presser (1990) and Wu (2006) asked respondents who claimed to have voted where their polling locations were. While this is valid, it fails to take into account those who do not know the location due to a recent change of address or absentee voting. Alternatively, Means and Loftus (1991) requested that respondents recall perceptual information on the day of voting before answering whether and for whom they voted. By compelling respondents to think about what they saw, heard, and felt on that day, they were hoping to minimize the effects of memory failure in their surveys.

To add another layer of complexity, Belli *et al.* (1999, 2006) examine the interconnectedness of social desirability and memory failure. In particular, memory failure may reinforce social desirability, as respondents who do not remember whether or not they voted will respond with the socially desirable answer. This can be attributed to the wish to present oneself in a desirable light when making reconstructive inferences to recall what happened in the past (Fullerton *et al.*, 2007; McDonald & Hirt, 1997). Karp & Brockington (2005) suggest that contextual factors may affect the socially desirable bias, leading to variance in the rate of misreporting across countries. In a nutshell, this leads to overreporting that cannot be exclusively attributed to either memory lapse or social desirability.

By the same token, some scholars address the tendency for overreporting due to memory failure to be understated in surveys. According to Brehm (1993), the less active people are in a particular event, the more reluctant they are to answer questions about that event's details. Since

people's memory failure tends to be greater for events in which they were less active, the sample size for those with memory lapse may be much smaller than is statistically desirable in any survey. This higher-than-average refusal-to-participate rate among the inactive would effectively mask the effect of memory failure in resulting survey data.

It is with these previous studies in mind that we have designed the questions used in our survey. To better distinguish the factors of memory failure and social desirability, we referred to designs employed by both the American National Election Studies (ANES) and Belli *et al.* (1999). The questions are customized for a Taiwanese public, and we explain the research methodology in the next section.

Question Design

To test the effects of question design on detected levels of overreporting, we devised three questions, asking respondents whether they had voted in the 2012 Taiwan presidential election. Data analyzed in this study were collected as part of the National Science Council research project entitled "Survey of the Image of China, 2014" that was directed by Chung-Li Wu, and carried out by the Center for Survey Research at Academia Sinica. They are based on a nationally representative probability sample of adults living in the 17 counties and cities of Taiwan and Fujian provinces, as well as the five municipalities of Taipei, New Taipei, Taichung, Tainan, and Kaohsiung. Telephone interviews were conducted from February 12 through March 7, 2014, and a total of 1,544 eligible respondents were successfully interviewed.² The respondents were all 20 years of age or above and residents of the above-mentioned areas.

²Note that the 2012 presidential election was held on January 14, 2012, and the survey was implemented in February and March 2014. We appreciate one reviewer's comment on the interaction effect between the experiment and the time lapse, and that this might increase the probability of memory failure. We candidly admit that this is a deficiency of this study, and it arises because the survey was not specifically designed for this experiment.

To simplify discussion of the three questions, we called these three groups “Control,” “Experiment 1,” and “Experiment 2.” For the wording of the questions as well as how they are coded for use in our analyses, please see the Appendix A. The Control group, the standard NES, incorporates a basic memory recollection mechanism in the wording of the question by listing the candidates who ran for election. This feature helps the respondent distinguish the 2012 election from others that they may have voted in, to ensure that we get accurate answers for 2012 only. This should not be seen as an effort to mitigate memory failure. It also incorporates the phrase “a lot of people were not able to vote.” This reminds the respondent that the answer “not able to vote” is valid for this question. It should not be intended to present not voting as a socially undesirable outcome. It should be seen that the Control question is not adjusted to allow for either memory failure or social desirability factors.

Experiment 1, however, is a question that directly and intentionally addresses the respondent’s possible memory failure. The question design in this case utilizes “episodic memory” theory, according to which voters would recall voting by scrutinizing perceptual information on the day of voting. The series of questions before the actual “did you vote?” control question is designed to help the respondent recall the events of the day, so they do not simply state they voted due to a lapse of memory. After all, persons who, for instance, cannot recall how they went to the polling stations are much less likely to insist that they actually voted.

Simultaneously, we incorporated potential reasons why some people may not have voted in much more specific terms than we did in the Control question. This is largely in case respondents suffering from a lapse of memory report that they voted rather than that they did not vote due to social desirability concerns. As discussed, memory lapse tends to be reinforced by social desirability, and misreporting can be seen as a result of the combined influence of these two factors (McDonald & Hirt, 1997; Sanitioso *et al.*, 1990). Thus, the reasons for not voting are given to counter any inflated sense of civic duty that compels respondents to state that they voted.

Experiment 2, the question that tests for social desirability, stretches the definition of that “sense of civic duty” even further. By noting how deliberately not voting can itself be considered a form of civic duty and an expression of political opinion, the question actively dissuades respondents from thinking that claiming they voted when they did not is the only politically correct answer. The addition of the idea that not voting is also an expression of a political opinion is intended to guide the respondents toward believing that not voting, just like voting, can serve a socially desirable purpose. This allows them to admit to not voting without fear of perceived social embarrassment.

By splitting the samples equally and randomly across the three questions, we examine the presence of significantly differing reported voter turnouts, and if present, to what degree such differences can be attributed respectively to memory failure and social desirability. By simply observing the difference in the turnout rates between the Control and the two Experiment questions, we can determine if misreporting is indeed a problem in surveys of voting, and whether our question designs were successful in any way.

Our assumption is that the reported turnout rate will be the highest in the Control group that mitigates neither memory failure nor social desirability. It is expected that Experiment 1 produces the second highest turnout as we believe that overreporting from memory failure accounts for a smaller proportion of overreporting than that attributable to social desirability factors. This design can certainly be regarded as a failure if the turnouts from the three questions do not show significant discrepancies.

It should be noted that the questions as listed above are not meant to detect the difference between actual and reported voter turnouts. Not only is it impossible to obtain reliable data on which surveyed respondents actually voted in the 2012 presidential elections, but such data are also unnecessary for deducing the extent of detectable misreporting. Instead, the existence of significant differences in turnout levels extracted from the three questions is sufficient to extrapolate the presence of overreporting. Assuming that the lowest turnout of the three is closest to the actual

Table 3.
Report of Turnout by Question Context

	Control	%	Experiment 1	%	Experiment 2	%
Voted	372	74.85	440	84.62	417	79.13
Did not vote	110	22.13	66	12.69	97	18.41
No voting rights	10	2.01	7	1.35	8	1.52
Forgot if voted	4	0.80	6	1.15	5	0.95
Refused to answer	1	0.20	1	0.19	0	0.00
<i>N</i>	497	100.00	520	100.00	527	100.00

turnout, we can then proceed to analyze why overreporting is more prominent in the other two questions.

Discussion of Findings

The cross-tabulated results of the three differently worded questions are presented in Table 3.³ Excluding any respondents who skipped the question, 1,544 effective individual samples were obtained, roughly split into equal thirds. The results, unfortunately, are somewhat different from what we hypothesized above. While we expected the Control question, with no wording to mitigate any overreporting concerns, to produce the highest turnout, this is not the case. Instead, the Control question has the lowest turnout (74.85%), compared to 84.62% and 79.13% for the two experimental questions. In other words, the first hypothesis has been utterly disproven.

The second hypothesis, on the contrary, is consistent with the results presented in Table 3. We expect Experiment 1, which tests for memory failure, to produce a higher turnout than Experiment 2, which tests for

³A constructive remark provided by one reviewer was that this study is based on a post-treatment experiment and there was no pre-election survey. The assumption is that there are no significant differences between the respondents and therefore any discrepancies in the post-treatment experiment are due to the survey questions. We confess that one limitation of this study is the lack of panel data to address the validity of the findings, and it is necessary to collect such a data set to carry out further studies.

social desirability, because many more people are likely to lie about not voting due to social desirability concerns than to misreport due to a lapse of memory. If both factors are mitigated successfully in separate questions, the question mitigating social desirability would see a much larger decrease in turnout than the one mitigating memory failure. The larger turnout produced by Experiment 1 compared to that produced by Experiment 2 verifies this hypothesis.

The failure of our first hypothesis signifies that there are deficiencies in the survey design.⁴ The wording may have encouraged either an understatement of actual voting in the Control question, or an overstatement of voting in the two experimental questions. Because the design does not allow detection of whether individuals actually voted, it is impossible to detect the direction of the respondents' misreporting. Simply put, given the differences in turnout among the three questions, it is just as valid to suspect that many said that they did not vote when they did in fact do so. The assumption that a discrepancy between actual and reported turnout can only originate from people who did not actually vote may not be valid for the Taiwanese population.

Conclusion

This study employed the 2012 presidential election in Taiwan as an example and presented the results of a split-sample experiment designed to examine whether the survey context can reduce the propensity of non-voters to report in surveys that they have voted. We first examined the

⁴Two reviewers suggested that this study should evaluate the relationship between vote misreporting and individual-level variables, consisting of objective demographic factors and subjective cognitive factors. The former indicators include gender, age, education, ethnicity, and so on; and the latter include party identification, national identity, political efficacy, etc. The evidence has consistently shown that these sociopolitical variables have significant effects on political behavior. Although this is indeed insightful advice, this study seeks to assess the association between survey context and vote overreporting. This experiment with changes in the questionnaire context was far from successful, but vote misreporting from a comparative perspective is in need of much more research.

prevalence of turnout misreporting among survey respondents, and the results for the 2008 and 2012 elections showed a reported bias in favor of the elected candidate as against the losing candidates from the major political parties. The discrepancy between actual registered votes and those reported in the surveys was more than 10% of the total.

Such proof of significant voter misreporting in Taiwanese elections prompted us to formulate questions designed to mitigate its influence. This study focused on two causes of overreporting: memory failure, or the likelihood of respondents saying they have voted even if they do not remember whether they did so, and social desirability, in the sense that respondents feel that voting is a social obligation and they are ashamed to admit to not voting.

We investigated two experimental questions, one designed to decrease the effects of the former cause and the other to mitigate the latter. The first asked respondents to recall the events of the election day in order to jog their memories, while in the other we made it clear that not voting is an expression of political opinion in itself and is nothing to be ashamed of. The voter turnouts produced by the two experimental questions were then measured against a control question with no extra wording, so that the effect of misreporting can be shown.

Unfortunately, this experiment has not been successful. We expected the control question, with no attempt to mitigate any effect of overreporting, to have the highest reported voter turnout; this was not the case. Instead, the two experimental questions produced much higher turnouts, illustrating the failure of the study's attempt to mitigate misreporting by means of question design. We speculate that the cause of the failure can be attributed to the question design not having the intended effects.

We anticipate that these problems will inspire more profound research in subsequent studies. Improved question design and methodology may be the keys to the successful mitigation of misreporting. Changing the wording of the two experimental questions might be effective, but we must better understand how the wording of questions affects the thinking and behavior of respondents. In addition, we should note that some innovative

methods have been devised in the study of vote misreporting, for example, the Item Count Technique (ICT, also known as the unmatched technique or list experiment) (Blair & Imai, 2012; Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010b; Imai, 2011) and the randomized response technique (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010a).⁵ Obviously there is still potential for future research in this field.

Appendix A. Survey Questions and Coding of Answers

Control. “The next question is about the 2012 presidential election. In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were sick, or they just didn’t have time. How about you — did you vote in the election?” (01) I did vote (02) I did not vote (03) did not have voting rights then (04) I forgot (98) refuse to answer.

Experiment 1. “The next question is about the 2012 presidential election. In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were sick, or they just didn’t have time. We also sometimes find that people who thought they had voted actually did not vote. In addition, people who usually vote may have trouble saying for sure whether they voted in a particular election. In a moment, I’m going to ask you whether you voted in the election, which was — [time full] ago. Before you answer, think of a number of different things that will likely come to mind if you actually did vote this past election day; things like whether you walked, drove, or were driven by another person to your polling place [pause], what the weather was like on the way [pause], the time of day that it was [pause], and people you went with, saw, or met while there [pause]. After thinking about it, you may realize that you did not vote in this particular election [pause]. Now that you’ve thought about it, did you vote in the election?” (01) I did vote (02) I did not vote (03) did not have voting rights then (04) I forgot (98) refuse to answer.

⁵We appreciate the suggestion put forward by one reviewer that we should employ the ICT method to conduct research on vote misreporting in Taiwan.

Experiment 2. “The next question is about the 2012 presidential election. In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were sick, they just didn’t have time, or they believe not voting is a way to express their opinions, particularly their dissatisfaction with politics and disappointment with the political parties. How about you — did you vote in the election?” (01) I did vote (02) I did not vote (03) did not have voting rights then (04) I forgot (98) refuse to answer.

With all of the versions, interviewers were instructed to accept an “I did not vote” response, even if introduced as an interruption. However, the entire question was to be read if respondents interrupted with an “I did vote” response.

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