

# Working Paper M10/01

Methodology

## Middle Alternatives Revisited:

## How The Neither/Nor Response

## Acts As A 'Face-Saving' Way Of

## Saying 'I Don't Know'

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### Abstract

In this paper, 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. Our findings have important implications for the design and analysis of bipolar ratings scales.

*Middle alternatives revisited: How the neither/nor response acts as a 'face-saving' way of saying 'I don't know'*

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## INTRODUCTION

Attitudes can be broadly defined as evaluations along a psychological dimension of preference about a particular object (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). As such, the attitude is best conceptualised 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 analyse 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. 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 eponymous 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 mid-point of the response scale represents views which are genuinely neutral; that is to say, these must be *substantive* opinions that fall (approximately) at the mid-point 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.

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 amongst 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 (O'Muircheartaigh, Krosnick and Helic 2000). 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 'face-saving don't know' response, if evident at non-trivial levels, is likely to be particularly problematic for valid inference because it will lead to both over-estimates of the

degree of opinionation in the population and violation of the ordinality assumption that researchers typically invoke when analysing bipolar response scales. Our primary motivation in this paper is to argue that, for many bipolar response scales, it is the 'face-saving don't know' that is the primary threat to validity. Additionally, we seek to show that, counter to the satisficing perspective, it is the *most* motivated and cognitively able respondents who are more likely to select the midpoint of an item when their true opinion cannot be described as neutral. The remainder of the paper 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 mid-point 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 US 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 their outcomes and other variables in the dataset. 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, Roberts and Holt (1980) and Bishop (1987), found in their studies, 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 variables, 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 what we refer to as '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 odd-numbered bipolar response format. 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 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 (Rugg and Cantrill, 1944; Presser and Schuman, 1980; Kalton et al., 1980). This pattern suggests that substantive midpoints are likely to attract people whose opinions are relatively uncrystallised, 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; p.71). While the magnitude of this effect has generally been found to be small (cf. a non-significant 2% 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.

We have argued 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, Krosnick

and Thomas (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 three point scale. Branching questions involve two steps: respondents are first asked to report the direction of their attitude (e.g. favour, oppose, neither favour 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 selected the middle alternative. Malhotra et al found that validity was highest when branching questions were used to obtain seven-point scales and where respondents selecting an endpoint 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; p.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 face-saving 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:

H1: Respondents who initially select a 'neither/nor' alternative will select a 'don't know' option when this is offered in a subsequent branching question.

Our rationale here is that the reason that respondents who have no opinion on an issue will 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. Because holding an opinion on issues of public controversy is likely to be most socially desirable amongst those who

are (or claim to be) interested and engaged in the topic area, our second hypothesis is:

H2: For those with no opinion on an issue, selecting the middle alternative rather than volunteering a 'don't know' response at the outset will be most prevalent among the better educated and those who report more interest in the substantive area to which the question relates.

## 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 multi-stage CAPI 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 two, 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=3113). 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 AAPOR refusal rate (American Association of Public Opinion Research ([http://www.aapor.org/uploads/standarddefs\\_4.pdf](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 it 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 response (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 three 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 bipolar response scales are generally based in contemporary survey practice: agreement vs. disagreement; importance vs. unimportance; and satisfaction vs. 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 GM foods outweigh any dangers/ with the performance of the European Commission/ for Britain to be at the forefront of developments in nanotechnology?*

1. I don't really have an opinion on this issue
2. I have an opinion which is right in the middle on this issue

### 3. 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 also 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 three items, so the order conditions were combined.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the raw marginal frequencies for each of the three questions. For parsimony of presentation, directional response alternatives on either side of the mid-point are combined into a single category. The important thing to note about table 1 is the high proportion of both 'don't know' responses and middle alternatives, with only 41-58% of respondents providing substantive responses across the three items<sup>1</sup>. These, then, are clearly quite low-salience issues for the British public at this point in time, even though they may be of considerable interest to academic scholars and policy makers.

### TABLE 1 HERE

What proportion of the middle alternatives on these questions represent genuinely neutral positions on the underlying preference dimension? Figure 2(a) 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

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<sup>1</sup> When the GM item was administered as part of the 2003 British Social Attitude Survey the response distribution was: 14% agree, 37% neither/nor, 33% disagree, and 16% don't know.

opinion on the issue. Only 13%, 16%, and 25% of initial midpoints on the three 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% 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% 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)

FIGURE 2 HERE

The remaining verbatim responses, which did not provide sufficient information to be coded as either 'no opinion' or 'neutral', were allocated the code 'indeterminate'.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1(b) shows the final distribution of midpoint responses after reallocation of these second follow-up respondents; between three quarters and

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<sup>2</sup> The full distribution of verbatim codes for all three items is provided in the appendix.

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 confirming hypothesis H1. Figure 1 clearly shows that the raw distributions in table 1 substantially over-estimate the degree of opinion neutrality in the population and, as a corollary, under-estimate by a commensurate amount the true extent of nonattitudes on all three issues.

In addition to univariate estimates, it is also important to consider the implications of these findings for more causally-focused multivariate analyses, 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 ordinal logit models predicting attitude toward the EC, before and after reallocation of 'hidden don't knows'<sup>3</sup>. 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 sizeable discrepancies in the magnitude of coefficient point estimates between the two models.

Thus far we have shown that the vast majority of 'neither/nor' responses on all three items are, in fact, reflective of holding no opinion, rather than opinion neutrality and that this can result in seriously biased descriptive and causal inferences. We argued earlier that this phenomenon should be anticipated, on the grounds that more knowledgeable and engaged individuals will regard the admission of ignorance on matters

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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 plausibility of the proposed social desirability mechanism, table 3 shows the coefficients and standard errors from a multinomial logistic regression of each item on to measures of a) education and b) interest in politics (for the EC item) and science (for the nanotechnology and GM items) <sup>4</sup>. In these models, each item is coded to the following four categories:

- Substantive opinion (respondents who selected any of the directional substantive alternatives)
- Neutral opinion (respondents who selected 'neither/nor' and confirm that their opinion is 'in the middle')
- Initial don't know (respondents who volunteered a 'don't know' response)
- Hidden don't know (respondents who selected 'neither/nor' and subsequently said they have no opinion)

We regress this 4-category nominal outcome on to the measures of political/scientific interest and education, with 'initial don't know' specified as the reference category. The coefficients of the model can, therefore, be interpreted as the log of the odds that a respondent will be in a particular category of the outcome, rather than the reference category. The models also include controls for sex, age, and age squared. Because our interest here is in the relative propensity of people who have no opinion to select the 'neither/nor alternative' rather than to volunteer a 'don't know', table 3 presents only the coefficients for the contrast between 'initial don't know' and 'hidden' don't know'. Coefficients for the full models are available from the corresponding author upon request.

TABLE 3 HERE

Hypothesis H2 is confirmed for all three items. For the EC and GM items, those who express more interest in science and politics, respectively, and who have higher educational qualifications are more likely to employ a

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

'hidden don't know' strategy in responding to these items. For the nanotechnology item, the science interest coefficient is in the correct direction but non-significant. The education coefficient is, however, in the predicted direction and significant at the 95% level of confidence.

An objection to the conclusion that more knowledgeable and 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 and education, on the grounds that respondents with greater knowledge and 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, we re-administered the EC and GM questions to a fresh sample of the Ipsos-MORI general population omnibus<sup>5</sup> 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 4.

TABLE 4 HERE

Table 4 shows that, for the EC item, although offering an explicit 'don't know' does increase the 'don't know' rate by 7%, 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

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<sup>5</sup> Data were collected during October 2008 (n=2084).

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 counter-factual 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, 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/reduces random responding relative to the omitted condition.

TABLE 5 HERE

## DISCUSSION

The bipolar response scale with five or seven answer categories and a 'neither/nor' midpoint is perhaps the most widely used tool 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 multi-nation studies including the European Social Survey; the World Values Survey; and the International Social Survey Programme. 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 research design that has traditionally been implemented to delineate the various competing sources of error is not fit for purpose.

This is because 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 due to 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 (randomly) 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 'face-saving' way of saying 'don't know'. The split ballot design, in which respondents are randomly assigned to receive items omitting or offering a midpoint, is simply not capable of identifying the relative contributions made by each of these competing sources of error, at least insofar as the design has been implemented to date.

A recent methodological innovation implemented 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 8 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 midpoint might act as a face-saving 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 items we considered, the vast majority of respondents who initially selected the 'neither/nor' alternative on a five-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,



when the 'face-saving don't know' responses are reallocated from the midpoint to the 'don't know' category, marginal and multivariate coefficients were substantially altered. In short, the standard five-point item format results in seriously biased descriptive and causal inference. The motivation to employ a 'face-saving don't know' response strategy derives from a desire to avoid social embarrassment amongst respondents who feel that they should have an opinion on matters of public controversy. Thus, and counter to the satisficing hypothesis, the 'face-saving don't know' is disproportionately found amongst those with higher levels of formal education and who express greater interest in the issue area.

An important limitation of this study is the fact that we have focused on low-salience issues. This was a deliberate strategy that we adopted in order to be confident that we would obtain sufficient numbers of respondents with no opinion on each issue, in order to enable the sorts of analyses and statistical tests that we have conducted in this paper. On issues with which the public are more familiar, the proportion of 'hidden don't knows' would very likely be smaller and the potential for invalid inference concomitantly lower. To adopt Converse's terminology with regard to his 'black-and-white' model of public opinion, these items should 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 issues that are higher in the public consciousness. Having acknowledged this limitation, however, it is important to note that 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 (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Miller, 2001; Allum et al, 2008). Our findings are, 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? Our study again confirms that it is important to include a midpoint, because a substantial minority of people hold attitudinal positions which are

genuinely neutral. Omitting a midpoint will result in such individuals being forced to select a response alternative that does not reflect their true position on the underlying preference dimension. However, whether the midpoint is most appropriately labelled as '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 option of including an explicit 'don't know' option does not appear to solve the problem, as this had no impact on the rate of 'hidden don't knows'. Another possibility, that we were not able to investigate here, is the use of 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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## TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1 Marginal Frequencies for the three items

| Item                | Satisfied/<br>Important/ Agree | Neither/Nor | Dissatisfied/<br>Disagree/Not Important | Don't Know  | Total |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|---|-------------|-------|
| European Commission | 141 (13.7%)                    | 312 (30.3%) | 282 (27.4%)                             | 294 (28.6%) | 1029  |
| Nanotechnology      | 512 (49.7%)                    | 125 (12.1%) | 82 (8%)                                 | 312 (30.3%) | 1031  |
| Gene Modification   | 214 (20.3%)                    | 289 (27.4%) | 358 (34%)                               | 192 (18.2%) | 1053  |

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

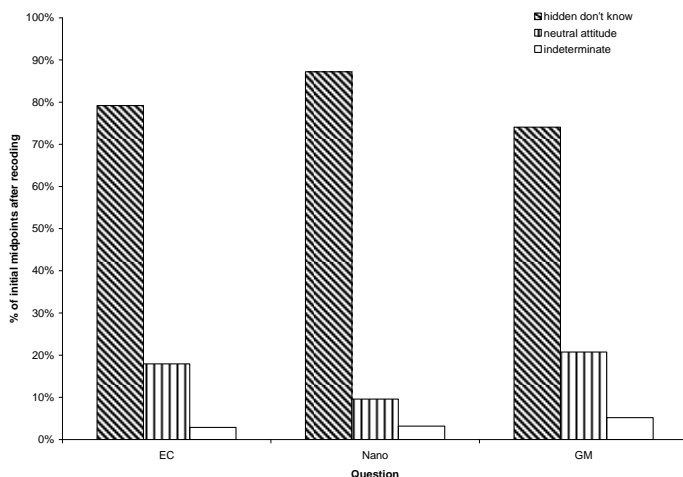
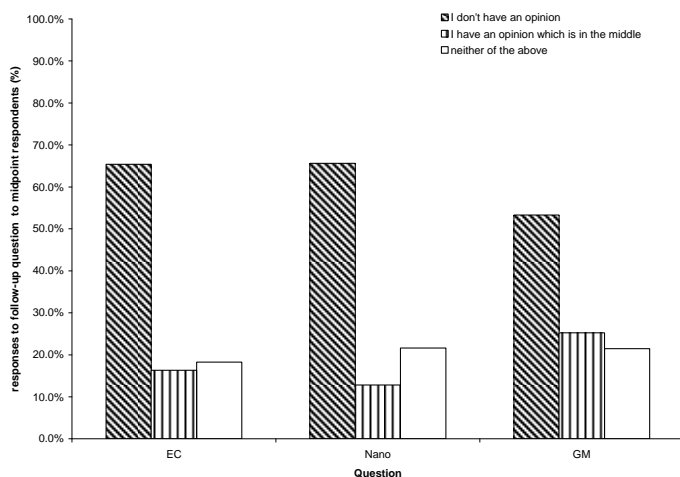


Table 2 Comparison of ordinal logistic regression models predicting satisfaction with the EC before and after reallocation of 'hidden don't knows'

|                      | Model 1                       |            | Model 2                    |            |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|------------|----------------------------|------------|
|                      | prior to re-coding hidden dks |            | after re-coding hidden dks |            |
|                      | B                             | Std. Error | B                          | Std. Error |
| Threshold#1          | -1.71**                       | 0.67       | -0.34                      | 0.82       |
| Threshold#2          | 1.04                          | 0.59       | 2.62***                    | 0.79       |
| Threshold#3          | 3.05***                       | 0.60       | 3.17***                    | 0.79       |
| Threshold#4          | 4.10***                       | 0.61       | 4.49***                    | 0.81       |
| male                 | 0.29*                         | 0.13       | 0.18                       | 0.17       |
| age                  | 0.06***                       | 0.02       | 0.11***                    | 0.02       |
| Age squared          | 0.0004*                       | 0.0002     | 0.0008                     | 0.0002     |
| political interest   | 0.11*                         | 0.05       | 0.09                       | 0.07       |
| degree               | -0.02                         | 0.24       | -0.02                      | 0.29       |
| other qualification  | 0.31                          | 0.20       | 0.26                       | 0.24       |
| social grade         | -0.05                         | 0.06       | -0.05                      | 0.07       |
| longstanding illness | 0.11                          | 0.21       | 0.08                       | 0.24       |

Coefficients are logits; n=735 (model 1); n=479 (model 2); source = Ipsos MORI general population omnibus survey.

Table 3 Multinomial Logit models predicting probability of hidden don't know relative to 'initial don't know'

|   |   | logit     | Std. Error | odds ratio |  |
|---|---|-----------|------------|------------|--|
| EC item<br>(=1020)                                    | Intercept   | -2.32***  | 0.59       |            |  |
|   | political interest                                    | 0.21**    | 0.07       | 1.23       |  |
|   | Sex (male=1)  | 0.18      | 0.18       | 1.20       |  |
|   | age   | 0.05*     | 0.02       | 1.05       |  |
|   | Age squared   | 0.0004    | 0.0003     | 1.00       |  |
|   | <i>Highest qualification (ref = no qualification)</i> |           |            |            |  |
|   | Degree or above                                       | 0.64*     | 0.30       | 1.90       |  |
|   | intermediate quals                                    | 0.40      | 0.24       | 1.50       |  |
|   | GM item<br>(n=1038)                                   | Intercept | -1.17**    | 0.44       |  |
| science interest                                      |   | 0.27**    | 0.09       | 1.31       |  |
| Sex (male=1)  |   | -0.02     | 0.21       | 0.98       |  |
| Age   |   | 0.40**    | 0.14       | 1.49       |  |
| Age squared   |   | 0.0003*** | 0.0001     | 1.00       |  |
| <i>Highest qualification (ref = no qualification)</i> |   |           |            |            |  |
| Degree or above                                       |   | 1.04*     | 0.43       | 2.84       |  |
| intermediate quals                                    |   | 0.16      | 0.26       | 1.18       |  |
| Nanotech item<br>(n=1027)                             |   | Intercept | -2.11**    | 0.78       |  |
|   | science interest                                      | 0.10      | 0.09       | 1.11       |  |
|   | Sex (male=1)  | -0.30     | 0.25       | 0.74       |  |
|   | Age   | 0.02      | 0.03       | 1.02       |  |
|   | Age squared   | 0.0003    | 0.0003     | 1.00       |  |
|   | <i>Highest qualification (ref = no qualification)</i> |           |            |            |  |
|   | Degree or above                                       | 1.16**    | 0.42       | 3.18       |  |
|   | intermediate quals                                    | 0.66*     | 0.31       | 1.94       |  |

Coefficients are logits; source = Ipsos-MORI general population omnibus.

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 | DK          | Total |
|---|-----------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------|
| Before reallocating middle alternatives |                       |             |                          |             |       |
| No explicit DK                          | 76 (13.6%)            | 138 (24.7%) | 211(37.7%)               | 134 (24%)   | 559   |
| Explicit DK                             | 46 (9.4%)             | 117 (23.9%) | 174 (35.5%)              | 153 (31.2%) | 490   |
| After reallocating middle alternatives  |                       |             |                          |             |       |
| No explicit DK                          | 76 (13.6%)            | 28 (5%)     | 211(37.7%)               | 244 (43.6%) | 559   |
| Explicit DK                             | 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 | DK          | Total |
|---|----------------------|-------------|----------------------------|-------------|-------|
| Before reallocating middle alternatives |                      |             |                            |             |       |
| No explicit DK                          | 99 (19.6%)           | 139 (27.6%) | 156 (31%)                  | 110 (21.8%) | 504   |
| Explicit DK                             | 110 (20.7%)          | 133 (25%)   | 170 (32%)                  | 118 (22.2%) | 531   |
| After reallocating middle alternatives  |                      |             |                            |             |       |
| No explicit DK                          | 99 (19.6%)           | 39 (7.7%)   | 156 (31%)                  | 210 (41.7%) | 504   |
| Explicit DK                             | 110 (20.7%)          | 41 (7.7%)   | 170 (32%)                  | 118 (39.5%) | 531   |



## Appendix

Of the 312 selecting neither/nor on EC item, 57 chose 'neither of the above' on follow-up 42 were coded to 'don't know', 6 were kept as 'neither/nor' and 9 were coded as 'cannot tell/ 'indeterminate'.

| Code  | Frequency | Coded to    |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| Don't have sufficient info                                  | 13        | Don't know  |
| No interest   | 1         | Don't know  |
| What they do is irrelevant to me/does not impact my life    | 3         | Don't know  |
| Balance between some good and some bad/depends on the issue | 3         | Neither/nor |
| Does not have Britain's interests at heart                  | 3         | Neither/nor |
| Don't know  | 25        | Don't know  |
| No reason stated  | 9         | Cannot tell |

Of the 125 selecting neither/nor on EC item, 25 chose 'neither of the above' on follow-up, 21 were coded to 'don't know', 0 were kept as 'neither/nor' and 4 were coded as 'cannot tell'.

| Code                       | Frequency | Coded to    |
|----------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Don't have sufficient info | 2         | Don't know  |
| No interest                | 2         | Don't know  |
| Don't know                 | 19        | Don't know  |
| No reason stated           | 4         | Cannot tell |

Of the 289 selecting neither/nor on GM item, 62 chose 'neither of the above' on follow-up, 45 were coded to 'don't know', 2 were kept as 'neither/nor' and 15 were coded as 'cannot tell'.

| Code                                     | Frequency | Coded to    |
|--|-----------|-------------|
| Too soon to tell/not enough testing done | 2         | Don't know  |
| Don't know                               | 45        | Don't know  |
| No reason stated                         | 15        | Cannot tell |