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An Expert Opinion on Ballot Wording

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on item 6 on the Official Ballot, Annual City Election, Burlington, Vermont, March 6, 2018. My name is Jane Kolodinsky. I am an applied economist, Chair of the Department of Community Development and Applied Economics and Director of the Center for Rural Studies/Food System Research Collaborative at the University of Vermont. I hold a B.S. in Nutrition, an MBA, and a Ph.D. in Applied Economics. I have been conducting research using questionnaires for almost thirty years and have published/presented widely based on those results. I also have taught undergraduate quantitative research methods and currently teach graduate level quantitative research methods at UVM.

I have been asked to comment on whether or not the wording of question 6 on “The Official Ballot, Annual City Election, Burlington, Vermont, March 6, 2018” could impact voter results. The answer is yes. I base this assessment on my more than thirty years of experience, my knowledge of standard question writing protocols and results of published research on the topic.

Democratic processes help voters to provide input on policies that reflect the preferences of the median voter (Burnett and Kogan, 2015). Published studies spanning dates from 1979 through 2017 provide evidence that question wording, complexity of ballot items and framing effects are associated with ballot results. How a ballot item is worded is associated with both how a citizen votes and whether a citizen casts a vote on a particular ballot item. The reference list includes the studies I reviewed.

While a ballot is not a survey, ballots are similar to surveys in that their aim is to obtain valid and reliable results related to citizen approve or reject a ballot item, even if advisory. In fact, Donald Dillman, who is the world’s leading expert on questionnaire design, uses a ballot initiative example in one of his books on survey design (Dillman, Smyth, & Christain, 2009).

Qualtrix, a leader in technology to support data collection, has as its first tenet of question writing as *avoid leading or loaded words*. The phrase “as part of our strong support for the men and women of the Vermont National Guard,” could be used as an example of a leading question in my graduate research methods class. “Strong Support” and “especially their mission to protect the citizens of Vermont” are leading phrases. These frames set the voter up to “answer yes.” These could also be seen as double barreled, another tenant of good question writing is not to be double barreled. This means do not ask about two things at once. Some voters might not support the Guard, but support their mission to protect citizens.

The actual ballot question is double barreled. While some voters might agree to the cancellation of the planned basing of the F-35 AND requesting noise reduction, other voters might agree to

requesting low-level noise equipment AND have the planes based at Burlington International Airport (do voters know the equipment only refers to the planes?). The question is also confusing and complicated. The fourth tenet of question writing according to Qaultrix is *question wording shall not be confusing or unfamiliar*. It is my opinion that the ballot question is both confusing and could be unfamiliar (equipment only refers to the F-35?).

Overall good question writing requires:

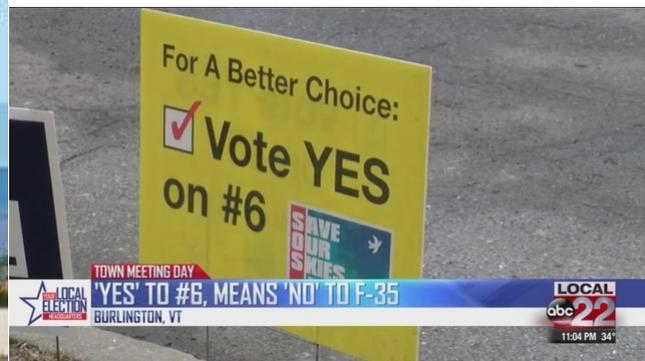
- Minimizing the amount of interpreting and defining a voter must engage in (simple language);
- Using as few words as possible to pose the question;
- Making sure yes means yes and no means no; and
- Making sure the response task is clear to the respondent after having read the question only once (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2009).

Indeed, there are guidelines to improve ballot design and surveys to “take a community’s pulse,” such as the advisory item 6 on the Burlington City ballot. These include clarity and brevity, simplicity, and neutrality (Niemi & Herrnson, 2003; Miller, 1999).

Published research literature concludes that the way ballots are framed and/or worded are associated with ballot outcomes.

“Even on a matter that is hotly contested and where the policy is relatively noncomplex and relatively well understood by voters, we find strong framing effects for changes in ballot title wording, though the effects are driven primarily by influencing whether individuals who previously supported the measure abstained from participation” (Hastings and Cann, 2014).

That research aside, Burnett and Kogan (2014) found that powerful campaign information can reduce the size of the framing effect. However, in the F-35 ballot item in question, there is at least anecdotal evidence that at least some of that campaign information was not clear. See two images from street signs, below.



Reilly and Richey (2011) studied the impact of language and complexity of direct democracy propositions, which are more complex when compared to traditional candidate vote decisions (p. 59). They found that readability of questions has a strong influence on participation in direct democracy. That is, voting citizens may not vote on a particular ballot item, even if they vote on other ballot items. Analysis of the Burlington City Ballot, number 6, using Word analytics, provided feedback that the question was written at a 14.2 grade level (more than two years of college) and had a readability index of 3.3. A score less than 30 correlates to “College graduate-very difficult to read. Best understood by university graduates.” The convention is to have a readability score of between 60 and 70 (Denini, 2010). Survey questions are typically written at or below a 6th grade reading level.

In summary, there are many reasons, outlined above, that suggest that results on ballot item 6 on the March 2018 Burlington City Ballot, may not reflect the preferences of the median voter. These include issues with question wording, question framing, readability of the ballot item, and complexity of the ballot item as written.

FN: I am a Burlington resident. Regardless of my own personal assessment of whether to vote yes or no on item 6, I firmly believe that ballot initiatives should be written in a way that will provide reliable and valid indications of voter preferences. As I communicate to all my students, my job is not to tell them what to think, but to learn how to think, and form their own opinions based on evidence.

References

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