

Response to a Government Survey as Political Participation: The Relation of Economic and Political Conditions to Refusal Rates in the Current Population Survey

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I. INTRODUCTION

Varying levels of satisfaction with government policies or performance and interest in pressing national issues could have, depending on the circumstances, either positive or negative effects on cooperation with government surveys. This becomes clearer when one conceives of response to a government survey as a form of political participation. Taking this point of view, we examine the relationships among some important economic and political indicators and refusal rates for the Current Population Survey (CPS) across a twenty-nine year period (1960-1988). The CPS (conducted through personal visit and over the telephone by the Bureau of the Census) gathers information used in the calculation of the unemployment rate. The political and economic indicators that are examined include the Gallup Poll Presidential Approval Rating, opinion on the most important national problem, the Index of Consumer Sentiment (ICS), the unemployment rate (UR), and the Consumer Price Index (CPI: both monthly and yearly change). We also look carefully at the historical circumstances surrounding political participation (including survey participation) during the period.

II. RESPONSE TO GOVERNMENT SURVEYS AS POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In discussing various sociological and psychological perspectives on refusing to participate in a survey (e.g., social exchange, altruism, social proof, compliance), Groves noted that the

... value of these concepts to applied survey methods is that they acknowledge that nonrespondents can have well-founded rationales for not cooperating with a survey request. In contrast to the view that their actions are in some sense based on ignorance, the work attempts to identify costs and benefits of responding from their perspective. (1989, p. 222)

In this connection, it is important to realize that a potential respondent's point of view or calculation of the costs and benefits of participation is likely to vary over time. For government surveys, the costs and/or benefits of participation may depend on opinions about the government's performance, which may be transient if they are based on the respondent's perception of current political and economic conditions.

To better understand how these attitudes can affect the decision to participate in a government survey, it is useful to think of the survey response as just another form of political participation. Lester Milbrath, in his classic work *Political Participation* (1965), developed a hierarchy of political involvement. According to Milbrath's classification scheme, survey participation can be considered primarily a passive input to the system. Respondents do not actively seek to participate; their participation is solicited. They are, however, providing input to the system rather than taking something from it, and this input can be burdensome at times.

A number of studies have shown declines over the last three decades in the levels of political trust and political efficacy or beliefs concerning government responsiveness. These declines seem to have been driven by reactions to specific political events. Of particular interest to us is Weatherford's micro-level examination (1987) of the relationship between the public's evaluation of the government's management of the economy (as well as reaction to some specific political events) and level of political trust. He found that political trust did, in fact, vary with changing economic circumstances, and Wright (1976) reported much the same thing.

The negative feelings about government have been linked to the decline in voting during this period, but it is not necessarily the case that poor government performance or the negative attitudes that result inhibit every form of political participation. Political protest or violent forms of participation would be expected to increase as negative feelings about the government rise in the population. But more conventional forms of participation also may increase. In fact, Miller (1980) reported that even though efficacy and trust in government declined after 1960, the public's sense of civic duty remained much the same.

The question is how does government performance, or a potential respondent's opinion about it, affect the decision to participate in the survey? Is the effect similar to that for voting, where a negative opinion makes participation less likely? Is there no effect? Is it possible that a negative opinion could actually increase the probability of participation? The latter case seems particularly likely if the survey concerns an issue or policy which is important to the respondent.

III. RESPONSE TO SURVEYS IN DIFFERENT POLITICAL ERAS

To understand fully the effects of attitudes toward the government on refusal rates over the twenty-nine year period, a more thorough understanding of specific events during these years was needed. Political history has often been divided into periods which are distinguished from one another by the unique events that occurred in each of them. These events contribute to the distinctive character of each period identifying it as a separate "political era." Recently the notion of political eras has become entwined with the concept of "political generation." A number of scholars have turned to the generation concept to explain the changing nature of the American political landscape (Abramson, 1975; Beck, 1974; Claggett, 1981; Billingsley & Tucker, 1987; Miller, 1992).

Political generations are age cohorts whose members are assumed to have relatively common historical experiences. Furthermore, they were exposed to important events at about the same point in the life cycle. For Billingsley and Tucker (1987), generational membership depends on the year the individual became eighteen. Based on their reading of recent American history, they have identified five active political generations which coincide with distinct political eras.

The period for which CPS refusal rates are available spans several of these political eras. The first is the *Sixties* or *Vietnam* era, which runs from the early 1960s to the mid 1970s. Besides the Vietnam war, the period was characterized by a concern for social issues. The years extending from the mid seventies through most of the 1980s is termed the *post-Watergate* or *Neoconservative* era. This period included a decline in the interest in social issues and, perhaps, an increased concern for economic self-interest. Certainly, economic issues were more important.

Most of the increase in alienation and distrust of government occurred in the first era. Later, citizens' feelings toward government either improved or remained about where they were at the end of the first era. Of particular interest to us is the fact that the importance of economic issues varied dramatically between the two eras.

IV. DESIGN

The proper test of the effects of both government performance and opinion about that performance on the probability of survey participation should be done at the micro level. Unfortunately, this is difficult because government surveys do not usually ask about political opinions, and nonrespondents would not answer anyway. Some analysis at the aggregate level can be done, however, by examining patterns in the

fluctuations of survey refusal rates and aggregate indicators of government performance and opinions over time. The monthly refusal rates for the CPS survey is used for this purpose.

The CPS is collected each month from about 60,000 households. A given household is interviewed for 4 consecutive months, leaves the sample for 8 months, and is interviewed again in the next 4 calendar months. Personal visits are required in the first, second, and fifth months, but the telephone may be used for the other interviews (or, if no one is at home, for the interviews in the second and fifth months). For more information, see U.S. Department of Labor (1988).

Two crucial assumptions of this analysis are that potential respondents know the survey is being conducted by the government and know the subject of the survey. These assumptions are valid in most cases because a letter is sent prior to the interviewer's first visit. The letter explains the purpose of the survey and how the household was selected. Furthermore, the interviewer repeats this information as part of his or her introduction.

For the current analyses, eight economic and political indicators related to government performance were used. Three were available from BLS data-- the CPI-Urban seasonally adjusted monthly change, the CPI-Urban unadjusted twelve-month change, and the seasonally adjusted civilian noninstitutionalized unemployment rate (UR). In contrast to these relatively objective indicators of the state of the economy, we obtained several more subjective indicators of the American public's opinion about the economy and the way the government was handling national and international affairs. Unfortunately, measures of political efficacy and trust are not available monthly; however, we utilized several other available indicators. One of these indicators is the Index of Consumer Sentiment (ICS) collected by the Monitoring Economic Change Program at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan (1990). Another indicator of public opinion about government performance is the Gallup Poll Presidential Approval Rating. Through the Roper Center we were also able to obtain Gallup Poll results on the most important problem facing the country across the period. We categorized each of these problems as falling into three general domains: social, economic, and foreign, with each variable reflecting the percentage of people who named that type of problem as the most important one facing the country.

Two organizational/methodological factors were also included in our analyses. The CPS has traditionally included a supplement on income during

the month of March. An examination of the time series shows that the inclusion of these questions are often associated with the highest levels of refusal for each year. Another factor that may affect refusal rates, but in the opposite way, is the additional awareness for government surveys during a decennial census year. Furthermore, Census Bureau interviewers collect all CPS data and may take advantage of their higher profile during the decennial census to obtain greater cooperation from respondents. Indicator variables were created for these two factors.

V. OVERVIEW OF THE CPS REFUSAL RATES

The monthly refusal rates for the CPS for the years under investigation ranged between 0.6% and 3.5% with a mean of 2.1%. Refusal rates for the political eras of concern are displayed in the Figure 1. This figure shows an increase in refusal rates across the years. The bulk of the increase seems to have taken place during the 1960-74 era with perhaps a slight decline during the early 1970's at the time of the 1970 census. Between 1975 and 1976, refusal rates increased sharply. Following 1976, there is a leveling off so that, in the remainder of the series, refusal rates were fairly constant, except for a modest increase in the mid-eighties.

VI. OVERVIEW OF THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INDICATORS

The potential impact of political and economic conditions on refusal rates might best be understood from a careful examination of the changes in these variables by era. Looking at the first era (1960-1974), a time when refusal rates were largely increasing, the unemployment rate actually dropped during most of the period, turning back up only near the end. The inflation rate, stable during the first half of the sixties, began to increase in the latter half of that decade. It declined in 1972, as a result of wage and price controls, but increased substantially by 1974. The early increase was undoubtedly a result of the war in Vietnam, while the latter increase reflected changing energy costs. During this first era, the Index of Consumer Sentiment declined in a way which corresponded with the increases in inflation. Presidential approval varied with inflation much more than it did with the unemployment rate.

Actually, economic issues were not the most important ones during much of this era. At that time, the Vietnam War and social issues such as civil rights were more salient. Watergate was also an issue in 1973 and 1974. It was not until the end of the period that the oil crisis drew people's attention to economics. Indeed, foreign issues were rated as the most important problem facing the country most of the era, followed by social issues. While foreign problems began at a very

high level and gradually declined, social problems increased rapidly in importance in the early sixties and remained fairly constant for the remainder of the era.

The Nixon resignation, high inflation, and high unemployment all appeared to be adversely affecting presidential approval as the second era (1975-1988) began, and a sharp increase in refusal rates occurred at the same time. The last half of the seventies saw a drop in unemployment, but the rapid increase in the CPI during this period dominated the economic news and caused a steep decline in presidential approval after a high point in 1977. Foreign and social problems showed a general decline in importance through the first two-thirds of this era, as economic problems dominated. Even Carter's handling of the hostage crisis in Iran and the presidential leadership issue it created was secondary relative to economics. In the mid-eighties, foreign and social issues became somewhat more important relative to economic issues, and this coincided with a slight increase in CPS refusal rates after a fairly stable period earlier in the era. The Iran-Contra scandal may have had an impact on the public's opinion of the government in the latter half of the decade.

The low inflation and low unemployment of the late eighties made economic issues of less concern, and foreign policy issues rapidly declined in importance with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Social problems, on the other hand, increased in importance as the 1988 election approached. This election probably marked the end of the Neoconservative era, beginning the *Post-Reagan* era. As the next decade began, economic concerns were again paramount. This time high unemployment and foreign competition were the major issues.

VII. POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND CPS REFUSAL RATES

To more formally assess the relations among refusal rates and the political and economic conditions during the political eras spanned in our data from 1960-1988, we examined the correlations among these variables separately in each era. As can be seen in the first column of each time period in Table 1, most of the predictor variables, especially for the first two eras, were significantly related to the refusal rates in the CPS. As suggested by the above informal analyses; however, there were several changes in the relations among these variables between the political eras. For example, the change in the CPI (both yearly and monthly) and economic problems were positively associated with refusal rates during 1960-1974, yet they were negatively related to refusal rates during 1975-1988. In contrast, presidential approval, the index of consumer sentiment, and foreign problems

were negatively related to refusal rates in the first political era, but were positively related during the second era. These changes in the relations of political and economic variables with refusal rates underscore the necessity of looking at these time periods separately.

Consistent effects on refusal rates were observed with the organizational/methodological variables that we examined, namely the decennial census and March income and work experience supplement. However, it appears that the relative importance of these effects does change over time. For example, it appears as though the impact of the March supplement is increasing over time, while the decennial Census shows a different pattern, being more important in the first era, and showing less impact in the second era.

As one might expect, there is a fair degree of multicollinearity present among these variables which will likely influence the particular variables that emerge as significant in multiple regression equations. Presidential approval, the closest measure to feelings about the government that we have, is consistently negatively associated with inflation and economic problems and most often negatively related to social problems, but it is positively associated with the index of consumer sentiment and foreign problems. The relations between presidential approval and the unemployment rate were inconsistent.

To examine the ability of these economic, political and organizational variables to predict refusal rates, we conducted a series of regression analyses that covered the time periods 1960-1974 and 1975-1988. Shown in Table 1 are the results of these regressions. In analyzing time series data with regression procedures, one must take into account the autocorrelation of errors that typically characterize these data. Although the presence of autocorrelated errors may not effect the parameter estimates, they will substantially impact tests of significance. Thus, we conducted regressions that included an autocorrelated 1st order lag variable and an autocorrelated seasonal variable (12 month lag) which appear in the third column for each time period. For comparison purposes, we included the ordinary least squares regressions in the second column of each time period.

It is worth noting that although time series models can often be constructed atheoretically, the autocorrelated error terms included in our analyses likely reflect aspects of data collection in the CPS. Households selected for the sample are interviewed for four consecutive months, are out of the sample for eight months, and then interviewed again for four months. The sample rotation is staggered so that in any given month, eight separate cohort groups are in

the survey. Thus, three quarters of the sample is the same from month to month, which no doubt causes considerable autocorrelation that can be captured by the 1 month lag term. Similarly, half of the households were included in the sample the previous year, which perhaps further emphasizes the seasonal pattern of refusal rates noted earlier. However, the inclusion of these lag terms may also effectively remove some effects of the historical context, which is of interest in the present investigation. Therefore, this method of analysis may be quite conservative for testing important hypotheses.

We conducted an additional set of regressions that are reported in the last column of the each period, that further incorporates a seasonal moving average term, which is a common time series seasonal model, and the inclusion of this term effectively reduces the remaining autocorrelation to noise. Whereas there is considerable difference between the regressions with autoregressive lag terms and the ordinary least squares regressions, there are very few differences between the regressions that incorporate a moving average term and those that do not.

As can be seen in Table 1, the regression models showed some similarities and some distinctive elements. The March supplement and unemployment rate were consistently predictive of refusal rates in both eras. Actually, the March supplement was associated with higher refusal rates in both eras, while higher unemployment was associated with lower refusal rates. Presumably, people are more motivated to participate in a government employment survey the worse the employment situation is. In the first political era, the decennial census was an important predictor of refusal rates, but it was not significant in the second period. Yearly change in the CPI was positively associated with refusal rate in the first era, but was not significant in the second era. In the second political era, from 1975-1988, presidential approval appears to be negatively related to refusal rates and foreign problems and the index of consumer sentiment are positively related to refusal rates; however, these findings only approached significance. Overall, the predictor variables accounted for much more variance in the first era than in the second; however, there is also more autocorrelation present in the first era.

VIII. DISCUSSION

This paper has advocated viewing response to a government survey as a form of political participation. Given this viewpoint, refusal rate can be related to political and economic conditions and the public's reaction to these conditions. The present analyses did find evidence that political and economic conditions were reliably related to refusal rates in the CPS. A

higher unemployment rate was related to lower refusal rates. In the first political era, higher inflation was associated with higher refusal rates. In the second era, greater economic expectations by consumers were associated with higher refusal rates, and greater foreign problems and lower presidential approval were associated with higher refusal rates.

The CPI and unemployment rate are two important indicators of government performance, and when they are high, it would not be surprising that negative feelings about government are engendered. This could lead to greater refusal rates. On the other hand, we believe it is more likely that deteriorating economic conditions could increase response, as people would be motivated to share their economic woes with the government. It appears from our results that respondents may not simply be lumping these two indicators of government performance together in deciding whether or not to refuse to participate in the CPS, but may be selectively responding to the content of the survey. In other words, they were more likely to respond to this employment survey as the unemployment situation got worse, taking advantage of the opportunity to express themselves. However, they may take out their dissatisfaction about higher inflation by refusing to participate in a government employment survey, as occurred in the first era. Following this logic, presumably people would be more likely to respond to a survey on prices during periods of higher inflation.

Our analyses exploring the relation of political and economic conditions to refusal rates have raised two important caveats. First, the relation of political and economic indicators with refusal rates may not be consistent across different time periods, as was the case with several variables we examined. In addition, it was clear that these indicators accounted for much more variance in refusal rates at one time period than the other. Our decision to split the twenty-nine year period for which data was available into the two periods was based on Billingsley and Tucker's classification of different political generations as well as dramatic shifts in the most important problems facing the country and a careful examination of the entire time series. Secondly, in the data used here, other variables also proved to be important predictors of refusal rates, such as the March supplement and decennial Census. For example, refusal rates were often the highest around the time of the income and work experience supplements administered in March. Furthermore, this effect on the refusal rates appears to have increased over the years, perhaps suggesting that the data collection organization has come to expect less cooperation during the administration of the

supplements. Refusal rates also appeared to decrease significantly around the time of the decennial Census, reflecting the greater efforts (including mass media) aimed at the public to enlist their cooperation. Interestingly, the decennial census effects were much less evident for the 1980 Census. This could be because refusal rates were relatively stable throughout the second period.

The recognition that the actions of the survey organization can have an important effect on nonresponse rates is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it further complicates an already complicated causal explanation; but, it also provides hope that survey organizations can have some control over the results they get. Of course, it is incumbent upon the organization to learn what procedures work best and to apply them.

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Figure1. CPS Yearly Refusal Rates

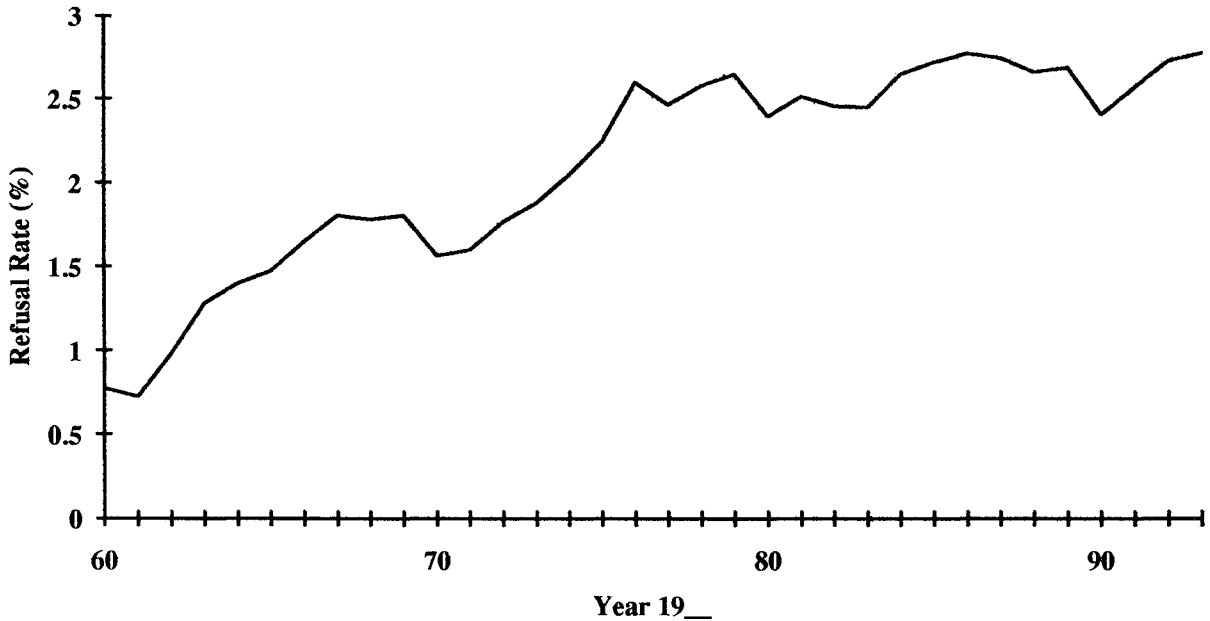


Table 1. Correlation and Regression analyses of Political and Economic variables on Refusal Rates

Predictor	1960-1974				1975-1988			
	Correlation	OLS Reg.	Auto Reg. w/ AR 1, 12	ARMA Reg.	Correlation	OLS Reg.	Auto Reg. w/ AR 1, 12	ARMA Reg.
Census Year	-.30**	-.328**	-.079	-.111**	-.16*	-.139	-.120	-.063
March Supplement	.20**	.332**	.118**	.102**	.44**	.427**	.225*	.237**
Yearly CPI change	.63**	.073**	.041**	.043*	-.30**	-.014	-.025	-.019
Monthly CPI change	.52**	-.072	-.039	-.029	-.20**	-.084	-.030	-.021
Unemploy. Rate	-.51**	-.135**	-.089**	-.075**	-.28**	-.077**	-.084**	-.074**
Presidential Approval	-.62**	-.003	-.001	-.001	.22**	-.003	-.003	-.004+
Consumer Sentiment	-.40**	-.001	.005+	.002	.31**	.000	.003	.005+
Economic Problems	.31**	.001	.000	-.001	-.28**	.001	.000	.000
Foreign Problems	-.55**	.001	-.001	.001	.30*	.010**	.004	.003+
Social Problems	.55**	.008**	-.001	-.001	.10	.000	.000	.000

+ p < .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01