

## Mode of Administration, Retrospective Recall and the Validity of Vote Reports

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### ABSTRACT

Survey respondents have consistently been found to overreport their participation in political elections. Lots of research has been done about the sociodemographic correlates of vote overreporting, but only a few studies analyzed determinants which survey researchers have under their control in order to reduce the problem. Theoretical explanations have assumed memory failure and social desirability bias to explain overreporting. Taking these explanations as a starting point, we tested firstly whether asking retrospective questions about the participation in elections which date back longer in time leads to more overreporting. The second hypothesis is that ensured response privacy eliminates the need for positive self-presentation and thus reduces overreporting. Using data from a field experiment, we found that when already a substantial time has elapsed between the election under consideration and the survey interview, increasing this time lag does not increase the probability of vote reports. This was however the case when the data was collected interviewer- rather than self-administered. Thus, using an administration mode which ensures response privacy successfully reduces vote overreporting.

**Keywords:** Memory Failure, Response Privacy, Social Desirability Bias, Vote Overreporting.

### 1. Introduction

A good deal of research about the determinants of electoral participation relies on survey respondents' self-reports about whether they voted or not. However, the validity of such survey measures have been challenged, since studies with individual-level validation data have shown the presence of substantial response bias (Belli et al., 1999; Presser & Traugott, 1992). In particular, virtually all response errors are in the direction of overreporting. For the period between 1964 and 1990, it has been found with data from the American National Election Study (NES) that between 7.8 and 14.2% of all subjects incorrectly reported to have voted, but only between 0.0 and 1.4% failed to report to have voted when they actually did (Belli et al., 2001). Outside the U.S., overreporting is less common. Researchers found for Great Britain in 1987

that 3%, and for Sweden in the period between 1979 and 1988 that between 3.2 and 5.9% of the respondents falsely claimed to have participated in national elections (Granberg & Holmberg, 1991; Swaddle & Heath, 1989). Since in the U.S. the true participation rates are in general lower compared to those in European countries, more overreporting in American surveys results because of more respondents at risk to do so (Anderson & Silver, 1986).

Vote overreporting leads to a systematic overestimation of the prevalence of electoral participation in a survey sample. The more serious problem is that it biases results about which factors are antecedent conditions of voting and conclusions about the relative importance of these conditions. Accordingly, the association between the respondents' education and their political involvement on the one hand, and their propensity to vote in political elections on the other, were found to be substantially stronger when self-reported rather than validated voting behavior was included into the analysis (Abramson & Claggett, 1984, 1989; Cassel, 2003; Bernstein et al., 2001; Presser & Traugott, 1992). For political participation research, it is prohibitively costly and often impossible because of data-protection laws only to use validated voting data. It is thus of great importance to find effective means to avoid or at least to reduce vote overreporting and thus to preserve the usability of survey data in political research.

### 2. Determinants of Vote Overreporting

Most research about the determinants of vote overreporting has concentrated on its sociodemographic correlates. Accordingly, it was found that subjects who overstate their electoral participation are on average younger, more educated and less wealthy than respondents who correctly reported whether they voted in the election under consideration (Granberg & Holmberg, 1991). Another very consistent finding from U.S.-American studies is that African-Americans are more prone to vote overreporting, compared to other citizens (Abramson & Claggett, 1984, 1991; Anderson et al., 1988; Belli et al., 2001; Bernstein et al., 2001).

These results provide important insights into which groups of respondents are more vulnerable to overreporting and thus offer valuable guidance when

researchers try to correct this bias after data collection. However, they do not provide advice about how vote overreporting can be avoided or at least reduced during the fieldwork. The latter task requires knowledge about why vote overreporting occurs, from which practical measures can be derived for how this response bias can be minimized. Two theoretical approaches predict such reason for vote overreporting.

### 2.1. Memory Failure

The first, cognitive explanation for vote overreporting assumes this bias to result because respondents are only imperfectly able to remember whether they participated in the election under consideration (Belli et al., 2001). However, in order to explain why memory failure leads in nearly all cases to over- but rarely to underreporting, additionally the source-monitoring framework has been applied (Belli et al., 1999). Here, people who answer retrospective questions about their participation in elections firstly are assumed to search their memory for representations of this kind of behavior. When successful, they have to attribute this memory trace in a second step to a particular situationally or temporarily defined source and so to determine when and where the behavior took place (Johnson et al., 1993). These attributions are done in a heuristic, little effortful and often completely automatic way of information processing. As a result, the source of a particular memory trace is easily misattributed to a wrong election. Respondents who participated in any election before the survey interview or those who only had an intention to vote may misattribute memory traces about these instances as evidence for having voted in the election under consideration. Since actual non-voters can be expected to be very likely to have voted at least once in their prior life, attribution errors will lead more frequently to over- than underreporting. As the true source of existing memory traces can be less reliably judged when more time has elapsed since the behavioral episode, the likelihood of vote overreporting is predicted to increase when survey interviews are conducted more distant in time from the election day.

Abelson and colleagues (1992) analyzed the cognitive explanation of vote overreporting with NES post-election data from the U.S.-presidential elections in 1986 and 1988, as well as from the 1988 primary election. With individual-level validation data from the official voter register, it was shown that 5 months after the election held in 1986, the percentage of non-voters who reported to have voted was 16.3%, and this proportion increased to 40.0% when respondents were asked about their electoral participation 6.5 months after this election. The results for the primary election

in 1988 were similar: 3 months after the election 31.6%, but 8 months later 57.1% of the non-voters answered that they voted. However, in the case of the presidential election in 1988, the percentage of non-voters who reported to have voted increased just from 54.3% to 57.3% when the surveys were conducted 5 instead of 8 months after the election day. This difference did not prove to be statistically significant.

More evidence for the hypothesis that a longer time period between the election day and the survey interview leads to more vote overreporting was found in a second study using two data sources (Belli et al., 1999). The first was a telephone survey conducted with a nationwide sample after the U.S.-presidential election in 1996. The fieldwork for this survey started at the day after the election and took 85 days to be completed. It was found that shortly after the election in November, 59.8% of respondents reported to have voted, and this figure increased significantly to 74.9% at the end of the survey in January 1997. This strong increase in vote reports provides evidence for more overreporting when the election is longer ago. The second data source was a survey which was conducted in Oregon after the senate election in 1996, where individual-level validation data was available. The fieldwork started directly after the election and lasted 42 days: In the first week, 15.5%, but later 29.2% of the respondents overreported their electoral participation.

The available evidence supports the cognitive explanation of vote overreporting and suggests that response bias can be minimized when retrospective self-reports about electoral participation are collected as soon as possible after the election day. This has however only been shown for periods of elapsed time up to 8 months. Yet, respondents are in some cases asked about whether they voted in elections which were as long as 7 years ago or even about their participation in the first election they were at an eligible age (Butler & Stokes, 1974; Verba et al., 1995). It is thus a relevant question whether a delay in conducting the survey interviews has still a marginal effect on the probability of overreporting, when the elapsed time since the election day is in the magnitude of years rather than of months. We are not aware of any study where this question has been addressed.

### 2.2. Social Desirability Bias

Social desirability bias (SD-bias) has been assumed to be the second reason why survey respondents overreport their participation in political elections (Bernstein et al., 2001; Presser & Traugott, 1992). Accordingly, norms of civil engagement prescribe the participation in political elections to be a citizen's

duty, so that the act of voting is positively evaluated in society. Survey respondents who, for whatever reason, failed to vote may thus feel pressures not to admit their nonconformity with the participation norm and instead simply to report to have participated. Socially desirable responding may result either from the respondents' need for self-deception or because they want to create a positive impression in others (Paulhus, 2002). Self-deceptive SD-bias is a defensive, unconscious and self-directed distortion of survey responses, where the subjects' aim is to preserve a positive self-concept. In contrast, the respondents' motivation underlying impression-management strategies is to manipulate an external audiences' evaluation of the own person and in this way to gain social approval from these others. Self-deception can be expected to bias survey reports in the direction of social norms, irrespective of whether evaluative reactions from others have to be expected. However, in the case of impression-management-based SD-bias, vote overreporting is only to be expected when others are present, able to perceive the answers and thus in the position to sanction these answers.

Only a few empirical results provide support for the hypothesis that SD-bias is the causal mechanism which underlies vote overreporting. In an experimental study, subjects were instructed to answer questions about whether they participated in past elections either in a way as to provoke the most positive or the most negative evaluations from others (Holbrook et al., 2003). It was found that subjects under the 'fake good'-instruction significantly more often claimed to have voted than under the 'fake bad'-condition. Thus, subjects regarded to report to have voted to be more instrumental for creating a positive impression than not doing so.

The study from Belli and colleagues (1999) tested with two datasets whether modifications in the question wording reduce vote overreporting. In the experimental question wording, respondents were first asked to think about details of the election day and than to consider carefully whether they really voted in the respective election. Beside the response options 'yes' and 'no', the additional alternatives 'I thought about voting this time but didn't' and 'Usually I vote but didn't this time' were added. Compared with the standard NES-question wording, the experimental wording reduced the differences between the self-reported and validated electoral participation in a survey conducted after the 1996 senate election in Oregon. Furthermore, the modified question reduced the probability of respondents from a nationwide telephone survey to report to have voted in the 1996 U.S.-presidential election. The authors offered a cognitive interpretation of these wording effects: The cued recall and improved motivation for more intensive memory search reduced

the incidence of errors when recalling the electoral participation. An alternative or additional explanation could be that the more elaborated question wording reduced SD-bias. Thus, the appeal for correctness may have increased the respondents' accuracy motivation and led them to abandon self-presentation strategies. The additional response options may furthermore have offered an excuse for not having voted and thus may have reduced the felt undesirability of such a failure.

Impression-management-based SD-bias depends on whether others are able to perceive, to evaluate and possibly to sanction the response behavior. Thus, more vote overreporting can be expected under the condition of low response privacy. Such privacy effects have been found for a great number of other sensible survey topics (cf. Epstein et al., 2001; Hewitt, 2002). Whether more response privacy leads to reduced vote overreporting is an undecided question. Visser and colleagues (1996) compared the predictive power of the Columbus Dispatch Newspaper pre-election mail survey for the outcome of the state election with that of two statewide telephone surveys. In the time period between 1980 and 1994, the mail survey, despite lower cooperation rates, was consistently more successful in predicting the election results than the telephone surveys. The good performance of the mail survey was attributed to the more private response situation, which discourages respondents, who in fact did not intend to vote, to report a candidate preference, and in this way to bias the survey results.

A more direct test of privacy effects was undertaken in an early study with individual-level validation data. Here, the probability of overreporting the participation in the 1972 primary election between three different modes of administration was compared (Locander et al., 1976). These modes were self-administered drop-off pick-up questionnaires on the one hand, and non-private interviewer-administered telephone and face-to-face interviews on the other. According to the results, self-administration leads to 3 percentage points less overreporting compared to the face-to-face mode, but to 5 percentage points more than in the telephone interviews. However, none of the differences were statistically significant. Another study with a locally defined random probability sample compared the percentage of respondents who admitted that they do not intend to vote in the next federal election in Germany between different administration modes (Reuband & Blasius, 1996). This was the case for 14.8% of the respondents in interviewer-administered face-to-face interviews, for 16.7% in telephone-interviews and for 16.8% when self-administered mail questionnaires were used for data collection. Whether these differences are statistically significant has not been reported.

### 3. Empirical Study

The first aim of this study is to analyze whether the respondents' susceptibility to vote overreporting increases with the time elapsed since the election day. In particular, we wanted to find out whether the negative effect of a longer time distance between the election day and the survey interview persists, when the elapsed time is substantially longer than the one analyzed in previous studies. The second and main aim of this study is to test whether a more private response situation prevents the respondents' impression-management strategies and therefore leads to less vote overreporting.

#### 3.1 Method

The respondents in our study were a multi-stage local random probability sample of residents from a metropolitan area in Germany (about 480.000 inhabitants). Households were first listed with a random-walk procedure, and then the respondents were selected using the last-birthday method. Respondents were included into the sample who were at least 18 years old, German citizens and thus eligible for participating in political elections in Germany. The 400 realized interviews took place at the respondents' homes and were conducted computer-assisted. The survey was realized in two field periods, where the first took place from August 2001 to March 2002 (N=223) and the second from September 2002 to January 2003 (N=177). Each part of the study was realized with independent samples from the same population and with exactly the same sampling procedure. The cooperation rate, calculated according to the AAPOR standard response-rate definition (RR1), was 45.0%. Respondents were asked the questions about their participation in political elections after they had answered about two-thirds of the longer questionnaire, which took on average 47.4 minutes to be completed.

- *Time distance between the election and survey interview:* Two sources of variation were utilized in order to operationalize differences in the time distance between the election day and the survey interview. Firstly, the respondents were asked about whether they participated in the last three parliamentary elections on the federal level in Germany. These elections took place in September 1998, in October 1994 and in December 1990. Thus, the elections were held on average 44.2, 91.7 and 147.7 months before the respondents answered the questions about whether they voted. The second source of variation for how much time was elapsed since the election day was when the respondents were interviewed during the field work. For respondents who took part in the

second field period, each of the elections was on average 11.2 months longer ago, compared to the subjects who participated in the first field period (c.f. table 1). The combination of both sources of variation leads to considerable differences in how long the respondents had to remember back in order to answer the questions about their electoral participation: For respondents interviewed at the beginning of the first field period, the most recent election in 1998 was only 35 months ago, whereas these are 155 months for subjects who answered the question about their participation in the election in 1990 at the end of the second field period. On average across all respondents and election years, this time distance was 92.6 months (std.: 42.7). In the following analyses, we utilized (a) the election year, (b) whether the respondents were interviewed in the first or second field period of the survey and (c) the total number of months which were elapsed between the respective election and the interview as indicators for the severity of memory problems when answering the electoral participation questions.

Table 1: Average Time Elapsed between Election Day and Survey Interview in Months

	Field Period		All
	First	Second	
Election Year			
- 1998	39.4	50.2	44.2
- 1994	86.8	97.5	91.7
- 1990	142.9	153.6	147.7
All	87.5	98.7	92.6

- *Privacy of the response situation:* Whether the respondents' answers about their electoral participation were private or discernable by others was varied by using either a self- or interviewer-administered mode of data collection. In order to avoid any form of self-selection of the respondents according to the administration mode and any differences in how the interviewers behaved during the contact phase, neither the interviewer nor the respondent knew at the beginning of the interview the mode under which the electoral participation questions were administered. For all respondents, the interviews started interviewer-administered, where the interviewer read out the questions and recorded the answers into a laptop-computer (CAPI). After about one third of the questions, the interview software randomly assigned the respondent to a condition where either the CAPI-interview was continued, or where the mode was changed into self-administration (CASI). In the CASI-mode, subjects were asked to read the questions from the laptop screen and to type in the answers by

themselves. The interviewer remained present in the room and answered, when necessary, clarifying questions asked by the respondents. However, they were instructed to maintain a sufficient distance to the respondents, so as not to be able to observe their response behavior. Between the final assignment of the administration mode and the questions about the participation in political elections, the respondents answered 50 other questions from unrelated topics.

- *Criterion for respondents' susceptibility to vote overreporting:* In Germany, as in many other countries, data-protection laws prohibit the access to official voter registers and thus do not allow the validation of individual respondents' answers about their participation in political elections. In order to gain knowledge about the determinants of vote overreporting in such institutional settings as well, researchers have tested whether factors expected to predict vote overreporting explain how likely respondents reported to have participated in political elections (Presser, 1990; Reuband & Blasius, 1996). This approach is utilized in our study. We analyzed with logistic regression models whether a longer time span between the election and the survey interview as well as a public rather than private response situation lead to a higher probability of vote reports.

- *Respondent's answers about their participation in elections:* The first result was that, although the respondents had to remember their participation in elections which took place on average 93 months before the survey interview, they only answered in 0.9% of the cases that they cannot remember whether they voted or not (c.f. table 2). A more detailed look on this indicator confirms the expectation that memory problems are more common when the elections were longer ago. In the case of the most recent election in 1998, just 0.5% of the respondents answered that they did not know whether they voted or not. This figure increased to 0.8 for the election in 1994 and was found to be 1.5% for the questions about the election in 1990. The results secondly indicate that in our sample, 82.5% of the respondents answered that they voted in the 1998 election, whereas this were 84.9% for the election in 1994 and 85.1% for the most distant election, which was held in 1990.

- *Effects of time distance and response privacy on the probability of vote reports:* We utilized logistic regression analyses in order to test whether the probability of reporting an electoral participation is higher when the time between the election and the survey interview increases, and when an interviewer-rather than a self-administered mode was utilized to

Table 2: Retrospective Reports about Electoral Participation in Federal Elections

	Election 1998 % (N)	Election 1994 % (N)	Election 1990 % (N)	All % (N)
Reported Participation				
- Voted	82.6 (317)	84.9 (303)	85.1 (291)	84.1 ( 911)
- Not Voted	17.4 ( 67)	15.1 ( 54)	14.9 ( 51)	15.9 ( 172)
Valid Responses	100.0 (384)	100.0 (357)	100.0 (342)	100.0 (1083)
- Valid Responses	96.0 (384)	89.3 (357)	85.5 (342)	90.3 (1083)
- Don't Know / Refusal	.5 ( 2)	.8 ( 3)	1.5 ( 6)	.9 ( 11)
- Not Eligible	3.5 ( 14)	10.0 ( 40)	13.0 ( 52)	8.8 ( 106)
Total Sample	100.0 (400)	100.0 (400)	100.0 (400)	100.0 (1200)

collect the data. The dependent variable of the following analyses contains the subjects' answers about their participation in all three elections, thus the observations are not independent and the standard error of the regression parameter tends to be underestimated. This is corrected by computing significance tests on the basis of Huber-White Sandwich estimators for robust standard errors with the respondents as a cluster variable (Huber, 1964; STATA Corporation, 1999: 165 ff.). In all regression models, we included the respondents' sociodemographic characteristics as control variables as well (c.f. table 3). With respect to

these factors, we found that the probability of reporting an electoral participation increases with the respondents' age (Wald- $\chi^2=14.5$ ,  $df=1$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ) and is significantly higher for subjects with a high-school degree, compared to those with less education (Wald- $\chi^2=7.9$ ,  $df=2$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ). The respondents' occupational status had only a marginally significant effect on their vote reports (Wald- $\chi^2=7.8$ ,  $df=3$ ;  $p < .10$ ). This weak effect was due to subjects who have never been in workforce to have a significantly lower propensity to answer that they voted, compared to white-collar workers.

Table 3: Effect of Elapsed Time since Election and Mode of Administration on the Probability of Vote Reports (Logistic Regression Analyses)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	B (Std.)	B (Std.)	B (Std.)	B (Std.)
Sex ( <i>female</i> ) <sup>a)</sup>	-.30 (.30)	-.30 (.30)	-.29 (.30)	-.31 (.30)
Status <sup>b)</sup>				
- <i>blue collar</i>	.86 (.58)	.86 (.58)	.88 (.59)	.87 (.55)
- <i>white collar</i>	.86 (.35)*	.85 (.35)*	.87 (.34)*	.92 (.35)*
- <i>self-employed</i>	.87 (.64)	.85 (.64)	.91 (.63)	1.10 (.65)
Education <sup>c)</sup>				
- <i>compulsory education</i>	-1.21 (.44)*	-1.23 (.44)*	-1.23 (.44)*	-1.04 (.45)*
- <i>secondary education</i>	-.90 (.42)*	-.92 (.43)*	-.90 (.42)*	-.89 (.42)*
Age ( <i>years</i> )	.04 (.01)*	.04 (.01)*	.04 (.01)*	.04 (.01)*
Income ( <i>German marks</i> )	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Field Period ( <i>wave 2</i> ) <sup>d)</sup>	.13 (.27)	.13 (.27)	--	.14 (.27)
Election Year <sup>e)</sup>				
- 1998	--	-.04 (.21)	--	--
- 1994	--	.14 (.18)	--	--
Elapsed Time ( <i>months</i> )	--	--	.00 (.00)	--
Mode of Administration ( <i>self-administered</i> ) <sup>f)</sup>	--	--	--	-1.09 (.28)*
Constant	-.10 (.61)	-.09 (.67)	-.07 (.61)	.42 (.67)
N	1083	1083	1083	1083
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.07	.07	.11
Log-Likelihood	-449.9	-449.5	-450.2	-430.6
Wald $\chi^2$	25.4*	26.3*	23.7*	42.6*

Significance: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ ;Omitted categories: <sup>a)</sup> male, <sup>b)</sup> never employed, <sup>c)</sup> high school, <sup>d)</sup> wave 1, <sup>e)</sup> 1990, <sup>f)</sup> interviewer-administered

In a first step, we tested whether having been interviewed in the second period of data collection, and thus on average nearly a year later after the elections under consideration, increases the probability of vote reports (c.f. table 3, model 1). Although the positive regression parameter indicates a tendency in this direction, this effect is far away from being statistically significant (Wald- $\chi^2=0.2$ ,  $df=1$ ;  $p > .10$ ). It was tested secondly whether the chronological ordering of the elections had an effect on the respondents' vote reports (c.f. table 3, model 2). This proved to be not the case: The probability of reporting to have voted did not increase significantly when the elections were longer ago (Wald- $\chi^2=1.1$ ,  $df=2$ ;  $p > .10$ ). Thirdly, we analyzed the effect of the combined sources of variability in the time distance between the elections and the survey interviews (c.f. table 3, model 3). Our results indicate that the number of months elapsed

since the election day is positively, but not significantly associated with the incidence of vote reports (Wald- $\chi^2=0.02$ ,  $df=1$ ;  $p > .10$ ). The final question was whether utilizing self- or interviewer-administration, and thus providing high or limited response privacy, had an effect on the probability of vote reports (c.f. table 3, model 4). Here, we found a strong and statistically significant positive effect of interviewer administration on the probability of vote reports (Wald- $\chi^2=15.7$ ,  $df=1$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ). This privacy effect provides evidence for a substantially higher susceptibility to vote overreporting when the interviewers were able to perceive the respondents' answers.

#### 4. Summary and Discussion

Other research has found that the probability of vote overreporting in post-election surveys increases when the election day is longer ago. These studies tested the difference of being interviewed between one day and eight months after the election (Abelson et al., 1992; Belli et al., 1999). In our study, we analyzed the effect of considerably longer time periods on the respondents' reports about their electoral participation: The respondents were asked about whether they voted in elections which were between 35 and 155 months before the survey interview. According to our results, differences of this magnitude did not lead to a higher probability of vote overreporting: being interviewed in a late wave of the fieldwork or answering questions about elections which were increasingly longer ago as well as the combination of both sources of variation of time distance between the election and the survey interview did not affect the probability of reports of having voted. This, with previous results inconsistent finding can be explained in at least two ways. Firstly, research about the shape of forgetting-functions in the case of other topics has shown a non-linear, decreasing negative effect of elapsed time since an event on the probability that this event will be correctly remembered (Rubin & Wenzel, 1996). On the background of these results, one could assume that when already nearly 3 years have been elapsed since the event, as it was the case in our most recent election, increasing this time period does not have a strong marginal effect on the respondents' memory problems. A second interpretation could be, that the increasing susceptibility to vote overreporting, which was observed in other studies, may be an artifact of the non-random assignment of respondents to interview dates during the field period. Whether respondents can be interviewed earlier or later during the field period depends on how difficult they are to reach and at least partly on how cooperative they are. Thus, the self-selection of subjects according to these characteristics and not a genuine effect of elapsed time since the election may have caused the observed differences in the susceptibility to vote overreporting. The failure to detect effects of differences in the time distance in our study may be the result of our quasi-experimental design, which excludes such a self-selection of the respondents.

The second result of our study is, that the respondents' susceptibility to vote overreporting is substantially reduced when a private response situation is provided. Accordingly, respondents were significantly less likely to claim to have voted when their answers were collected self- rather than interviewer-administered. We can conclude that the interviewers' ability to observe and potentially sanction the response behavior

plays a significant role as a determinant for how likely subjects falsely report to have voted. This offers support for the hypothesis that other-directed social desirability bias is maybe not the only, but an important reason for vote overreporting (Presser, 1990).

Our results suggest two practical pieces of advice for survey researchers in the field of electoral participation. Firstly, when already three or more years have been elapsed since the election, the problem of vote overreporting is not getting to be more serious when retrospective questions about more distant elections are asked. The second conclusion is that the validity of respondents' self-reports about their participation in political elections can be substantially increased when survey researchers ensure the privacy of the response situation. This can be reached, as in our experiment, by using a mode of administration which prevents the interviewer from being able to perceive the respondents' answers.

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