Measuring Americans' Issue Priorities:

A New Version of the Most Important Problem Question Reveals More Concern

About Global Warming and the Environment

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Abstract

For decades, countless surveys have asked Americans the "Most Important Problem" (MIP) question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" Global warming and the environment have rarely been cited by more than a tiny number of respondents in these surveys, which some observers have taken to indicate that these are not important issues to Americans. This paper explored the possibility that this is a mischaracterization of public opinion. Three experiments embedded in national surveys (two done via the Internet, the other done by telephone) show that when asked the traditional MIP question, respondents rarely mentioned global warming or the environment, but when other respondents were asked to identify the most serious problem that will face the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it, global warming and the environment were the most frequently mentioned problems. Furthermore, a large majority of Americans indicated that they wanted the federal government to devote substantial effort to combating problems that the world will face in the future if nothing is done to stop them. Thus, future surveys should consider asking more than one version of the MIP question, because doing so may uncover Americans' priorities more fully than the traditional question alone.

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At any moment in history, large nations face complex multiplicities of problems, and no government can make significant headway in addressing all of them simultaneously. Consequently, choices must be made about where to devote legislative attention, and democratic policy-makers make these decisions guided partly by the polity's concerns and desires (Cobb and Elder 1972; Cohen 1997; Kingdon 1981, 1984, 1995; Walker 1977). Policy-makers' decisions are shaped by many forces, including what Kingdon (1995) calls "national mood," or public opinion, which legislators learn about from letters and telephone calls from constituents and from opinion polls identifying problems that the public considers most important for the country (see, e.g., Cobb and Elder 1972; Kingdon 1984, 1995; Peters and Hogwood 1985; Walker 1977). Therefore, to understand the ups and downs of an issue on the legislative agenda, we must understand the issue's ups and downs on the public's agenda.

The most frequently used survey measure of the public's agenda is the so-called "most important problem" (or MIP) question, developed by George Gallup in the 1930s (e.g., "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?"), and variants of it. This question has been the focus of a great deal of research investigating shifts in public opinion over time (Smith 1980; 1985) and testing the news media agenda-setting hypothesis (e.g., Althaus and Tewksbury 2002; Holbrook and Hill 2005; McCombs 2005). Additional methodological investigations have explored whether answers to the MIP question might be distorted by factors such as salience (Schuman, Ludwig, and Krosnick 1986).

The starting point for the investigation reported here is an observation about the results produced by this question in recent surveys regarding global warming and the environment. In a CBS News/New York Times poll conducted in September of 2009, just 1% of respondents said something related to "the environment," and no one was categorized as mentioning "global warming" in particular. In prior surveys by those organizations, dating back to 2007, the percentage of respondents mentioning the environment or global warming never rose above 3%. Meanwhile, "the economy" and "unemployment" have together consistently been in first place since January of 2008, when 24% of respondents mentioned them. The economy and unemployment reached a high of 61% in January, 2009, and eased back to 48% by December, 2009. Such data are consistent with a much greater focus of the news media on the economy than on the environment during this time (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2009a; 2009b), and these results might seem to suggest that few if any Americans placed top priority on the government dealing with global warming or the environment in recent years. For example, the *New York Times* (Rohter 2008) used answers to the MIP question to support the claim that "the economic slowdown is the issue most on the minds of Americans," while *The Economist* (2009) used MIP responses to conclude that one should not "count on public opinion" to support efforts to combat global warming, because "ignorance and indifference are rife."

However, there is reason to hesitate before reaching such conclusions. As beloved as the Gallup question wording is, it makes a series of assumptions that narrow the scope of problems mentioned. First, it focuses only on problems facing the United States, perhaps based on the assumption that Americans want their government to concentrate their efforts only on exclusively issues facing the U.S. Yet it is quite possible that Americans want their government to work not only on solving problems presently facing the U.S. but also on solving problems that

face the U.S. and other nations, as well as problems that affect only other nations and not the

U.S. Second, the MIP question focuses only on problems that exist today, perhaps based on the

assumption that Americans want their government to concentrate its efforts on the here and now.

But in fact, Americans might also want their government to look ahead to the future and deal

with impending threats. Answers to the traditional MIP question might therefore fail to

document public interest in addressing global problems and future threats, if such interest exists.

This suggests the possibility that asking an additional MIP question with different

wording might yield a fuller picture of the public's agenda. Specifically, surveys could also ask

respondents: "What do you think will be the most important problem facing the world in the

future?" But moving in the direction of asking such a question uncovers another interesting

consideration: optimism about solutions. It would be quite reasonable for some people to

generate an answer to this question by thinking along the following lines: "I think overpopulation

will be a huge problem in the future if nothing is done to stop it, but I'm confident that societies

will wake up and find ways to effectively reduce reproduction rates, so this won't end up being a

big problem at all." Thus, this respondent might choose not to mention overpopulation, but not

because he/she thinks it is not or will not be a problem. So it might be interesting to consider yet

another version of the MIP question: "What do you think will be the most important problem

facing the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it?" This wording might identify

different problems that people want government to address, rather than eliminating mention of

problems that people assume will be addressed successfully and only collecting mentions of

problems that are unlikely to be averted.

A final aspect of the MIP question worthy of reflection is the word "important."

"Important" is, of course, a completely reasonable word to use in this sort of question, but there

are others as well that could be used instead. Interestingly, a Google search of the Internet turns up the phrase "serious problem" on more than 6 million web pages, whereas the phrase "important problem" shows up on just under 2 million. Although a Google search should not be taken as definitive evidence about word usage, this results suggests the possibility that the word "serious" is a more natural and common way for people to describe top-ranked problems than is the word "important," which may be a construction of the survey research enterprise.

With all this in mind, we conducted three experiments embedded in national surveys of American adults to explore whether a new question wording would change the portrait painted by surveys of citizens' priorities. In the first study, respondents were randomly assigned to be asked one of four different open-ended versions of the MIP question:

Traditional. "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?"

World. "What do you think is the most important problem facing the world today?"

World/Future. "What do you think will be the most important problem facing the world in the future?"

World/Future/Serious/Unstopped. "What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it?"

With these data, we explored whether answers changed, especially with regard to global warming and the environment, across the four question versions.

Study One

RESPONDENTS

Data were collected from the Face-to-Face Recruited Internet Survey Panel (FFRISP), which is a national area-probability sample of American adults who completed monthly surveys

via the Internet between October, 2008, and September, 2009. Interviewers from Abt/SRBI

visited a set of randomly-selected homes around the country to invite one randomly selected

household adult to join the panel and complete one 30-minute questionnaire per month in

exchange for a free laptop computer (or the cash equivalent of its value) and free high-speed

internet access (if the household did not have that already) and small cash payments each month.

The present experiment was included in the questionnaire for the 11th wave of the panel launched

in September, 2009, and 90.6% of the participating panelists completed that survey (*N*=906).

The AAPOR RR4 for recruitment of the panel was 43%, yielding a Cumulative Response Rate 1

of 39% for Wave 11 (Callegaro and DiSogra 2008). All analyses were conducted using survey

weights that adjust for features of the area-probability sample design and that include post-

stratification adjustments so that the proportions of respondents in various demographic groups

closely match the true proportions in the population of American adults.

ANALYSIS

The first question asked of respondents was the MIP question, and respondents were

randomly assigned to one of four different versions of it. Responses were then coded into

categories. To develop the list of possible categories, we first examined respondents' open-

ended answers and created a preliminary list of 16 possible categories. Next, we examined

several major polling firms' categories for coding answers to the MIP question, identified four

others to add to our list, and separated some individual categories into multiple categories.[1] The

coding instructions were tested and refined, and the final codebook included 24 categories (the

final codebook is shown in the Appendix).

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[1] For example, our codebook initially included only one category for financial issues, but we
found that many polling organizations separated financial concerns into multiple categories, so
we included the following categories: "the economy" / unemployment, individuals' costs of
living, government debt and spending, poverty, and general income inequality.

Using this codebook, responses to the open-ended questions were coded into categories in multiple steps. First, whenever a respondent mentioned more than one problem, two coders independently divided that respondent's answer into individual problems. These coders had not participated in the creation of the codebook and were blind to both the question wording the respondent had been asked and the hypotheses being tested in the study. The two coders made identical decisions dividing up problems for 830 respondents out of the total of 906 respondents (92%). After the coders finished independently dividing responses into individual problems, they collaboratively decided on how to divide the responses for the 77 respondents about whom they did not initially agree. Of the 906 total respondents, 24 did not mention any problem, 701 mentioned one problem, and the remaining 181 mentioned two or more problems. Once the answers were divided into individual problems, a different pair of coders (also blind to the question wording each respondent had been asked and to the hypotheses being tested) assigned each individual problem to one of the 24 categories listed in Table 1. The coders independently assigned 89% of the individual problems to the same category. The coders then collaboratively decided on the proper categorization of each individual problem about which they did not initially agree, and a final editing process corrected a few miscodings.

RESULTS

Using only the first problem mentioned by each respondent, respondents asked the traditional question wording were most likely to mention the economy and unemployment (48%).[2] In contrast, only 1 % of all respondents mentioned global warming or the environment

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[2] In Studies One, Two, and Three, nearly identical results were observed when analyzing all problems mentioned by respondents instead of only the first problem mentioned by each respondent, so we report only the latter results for the sake of simplicity.

(see column 1 of Table 1).[3]

Across the three alternative versions of the MIP question, however, the proportion of people who mentioned the economy or unemployment fell steadily. These percentages totaled 48% for the traditional question, 31% for the World question, 21% for the World/Future question, and 10% for the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question. Each of the latter three percentages was significantly different from the preceding percentage (Traditional vs. World: χ^2 (1) = 13.40, $p < .05$, $N = 459$; World vs. World/Future: χ^2 (1) = 6.40, $p < .05$, $N = 448$; World/Future vs. World/Future/Serious/Unstopped: χ^2 (1) = 10.99, $p < .05$, $N = 447$).

The proportion of people mentioning global warming or the environment increased steadily across the question wordings: from 1% of all responses for the traditional wording to 7% for the World question, 14% for the World/Future question, and 25% for the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question, all significant increases (Traditional vs. World: χ^2 (1) = 11.79, $p < .05$, $N = 459$; World vs. World/Future: χ^2 (1) = 5.67, $p < .05$, $N = 448$; World/Future vs. World/Future/Serious/Unstopped: χ^2 (1) = 9.46, $p < .05$, $N = 447$). Thus, when asked the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question, one-quarter of all Americans mentioned either global warming or the environment, the most frequently cited category - more frequently cited than terrorism (10%), overpopulation (4%), and other problems. More than twice the number of people mentioned global warming or the environment than mentioned the economy or unemployment, a significant difference, $t(236) = 14.38$, $p < .05$.

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[3] In a September 2009 CBS News/New York Times survey, 42% of respondents mentioned the economy or unemployment in response to the traditional MIP question, not significantly different from the result of the present study's survey, $t(221) = 1.73$, $n.s.$ In both surveys, 1% of respondents mentioned global warming or the environment. These figures were generated by aggregating CBS News/New York Times poll response categories to match the aggregation in our coding scheme in an analysis of the raw survey data and do not match the figures released by CBS News and the New York Times.

Study Two

Our second study administered two versions of the MIP question in a national telephone survey: the traditional wording and the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped wording. We also asked respondents how much effort should be put into solving problems facing the world in the future.

RESPONDENTS

This survey was sponsored by the Associated Press and Stanford University, and the interviewing was done by GfK Custom Research. Random Digit Dialing (RDD) of landline and cellular telephone numbers yielded completed interviews with 1,005 American adults between November 17 and 29, 2009 (705 on landlines, AAPOR RR3 = 13%, and 300 on cellular phones, AAPOR RR3=11%). All analyses were conducted using post-stratification survey weights that adjusted the proportion of respondents in various demographic groups to more closely match the true proportion in the population of American adults, and adjusted for unequal probability of selection.

MEASURES

For half of the respondents (selected randomly), the traditional MIP question was the first question in the survey, and for the other half, the first question was the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped version. All respondents were also asked "How much effort do you think the federal government in Washington should put into dealing with the serious problems the world will face in the future if nothing is done to stop them? A great deal, a lot, a moderate amount, a little or none?"[4]

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[4] The second question in the survey was the alternative version of the MIP question that respondents had not been asked initially, so that every respondent was asked both versions of the question. We focus here only on answers to the first question each respondent answered, to

ANALYSIS

Responses to the MIP questions were coded using the same procedures as were employed in Study One. The two coders made identical decisions when dividing each respondent's answer into individual problems for 96% of the respondents. Two coders, who were blind to the hypotheses being tested and the question wording asked of each respondent, and who worked independently, assigned 83% of the individual problems to the same category. The coders collaboratively decided on the proper division and categorization of each individual problem about which they did not initially agree, and final editing corrected a few miscodes.

RESULTS

Using only the first problem mentioned by each respondent, the traditional MIP question yielded frequent citation of the economy or unemployment (54%). In contrast, only 2% of respondents mentioned global warming or the environment (see column 1 of Table 2).[5]

Fewer people mentioned the economy or unemployment in response to the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question. These percentages were 54% for the traditional question and 16% for the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question, a significant difference, $\chi^2 (1) = 155.20, p < .05, N = 1,005$.

As in Study One, the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped wording yielded a substantial

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avoid contamination of answers to the second question by answers to the first question. The figures released by the Associated Press combined the responses from both groups of respondents for each question, and so they do not match those reported in the present study.
[5] In a December 2009 CBS News/New York Times survey, 48% of respondents mentioned the economy or unemployment in response to the traditional MIP question, not significantly different from the present study's result, $t(501) = 1.90$, n.s. No respondents in that survey mentioned global warming or the environment, very similar to the 2% observed in the present study. These figures were generated by aggregating CBS News/New York Times poll response categories to match the aggregation in our coding scheme in an analysis of the raw survey data and do not match the figures released by CBS News and the New York Times.

increase in the proportion of respondents who mentioned global warming or the environment.

These percentages were 2% for the traditional question and 21% for the

World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question, a significant difference, χ^2 (1) = 90.09, $p < .05$,

N = 1,005. So again, the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question decreased mentions of the

economy and unemployment and increased mentions of global warming and the environment.[6]

Most Americans said they wanted the federal government to devote a substantial amount

of effort to dealing with problems that would face the world in the future if nothing was done to

stop them. Fifty-four percent said that "a great deal" of effort should be put into dealing with

such problems, 22% said "a lot" of effort, and 14% said "a moderate amount" of effort. Thus,

only 10% of Americans said that the federal government should put little or no effort into dealing

with these broader issues.

People who wanted more government effort to be devoted to addressing future serious

problems were more likely to mention global warming and the environment (compare columns 3

and 4 of Table 2). Global warming and the environment were mentioned by 24% of people who

wanted a lot or a great deal of effort to be devoted to future problems and by only 11% of people

who wanted less effort devoted to future problems, $\chi^2(1)$ = 9.75, $p < .05$, N = 498. Global

warming or the environment was the most frequently mentioned category among the majority of

Americans who wanted large amounts of government effort to be devoted to combating serious

problems that will affect the world in the future.

Study Three

To assess which specific elements of question wording changes were responsible for the

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[6] Global warming and the environment were slightly and not significantly more frequently
mentioned than the economy and unemployment (21% vs. 16%, respectively), $t(504)$ = 1.28, _n.s._
Although this difference is smaller than the comparable difference in Study One, the two
differences were not significantly different from one another, $t(725)$ = 1.49, _n.s._

differences in results produced by the two versions of the MIP question in Studies One and Two,

we conducted a third survey experiment. This experiment assessed whether the increase in

citation of global warming or the environment and the decrease in citation of economic issue in

response to the new question was due to changing "this country" to "the world", adding "in the

future", adding "if nothing is done to stop it", and/or changing "important" to "serious."

RESPONDENTS

Data were collected by Luth Research via the Internet from a national non-probability

sample of American adults.[7] For this study, a total of 164,091 panel members were invited to

participate, and 3,486 (2.1%) did so. A stratified sample of panel members was drawn to

resemble the U.S. adult population in terms of the distributions of gender, age, household

income, ethnicity, region, and education level, according to the 2000 Census. Email invitations

were sent to sample members beginning on October 7, 2009, and data collection ended on

October 21, 2009. No survey weights were used.

MEASURES

The MIP question was the first question in the questionnaire. Respondents were

randomly assigned to be asked one of 12 versions of it, drawn from a nearly complete 2

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[7] Luth Research recruited 1.4 million people to complete Internet surveys regularly. When the firm's panel was first created, RDD telephone calls were made to invite American adults to sign up to receive email invitations to complete surveys, yielding about 2,500 panel members. Additional phone calls were made to professionals working in the information technology sector who were on lists of professionals; these calls yielded about 2,500 more panel members. These initial 5,000 panel members were offered a chance to win cash or gift certificates if they referred friends or family who signed up to complete online surveys. Referred panel members were offered the same incentives to recruit other people. Panel members received a chance to win a prize each time they completed a survey, each time someone they referred completed a survey, and each time the referral's referral completed a survey. Panel members were also recruited through online ads (on the firm's own website, news sites, blogs, and search engines) and through emails from businesses or non-profit organizations with which the panelist had an affiliation.

(Important vs. Serious) × 2 (Future vs. Today) × 2 (Included "if nothing is done to stop it" vs.

Not included) × 2 (Country vs. World) matrix (see Table 3 for the question wordings).[8]

ANALYSIS

The first problems mentioned were coded using identical procedures as in Studies One

and Two. Agreement between coders for each step exceeded 90%.

RESULTS

Respondents asked the traditional MIP question again mentioned the economy or

unemployment significantly more often than did respondents who were asked the

World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question (51% vs. 13%, $\chi^2(1) = 94.6$, $N = 557$, $p < .05$).

Likewise, respondents asked the traditional MIP question mentioned global warming or the

environment significantly more often than did respondents who were asked the

World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question (1% vs. 21% $\chi^2(1) = 54.8$, $N = 557$, $p < .05$). Among

people asked the traditional question, the economy or unemployment were mentioned

significantly more often than were global warming or the environment (51% vs. 1%, $t(279) =$

15.73, $p < .05$). Among people asked the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question,

significantly more people mentioned global warming or the environment than mentioned the

economy or unemployment (13% vs. 21%, $t(226) = 2.50$, $p < .05$; see Table 3). Thus, the basic

results of Studies One and Two were replicated here.

Comparisons across rows in Table 3 suggest that movement from Version 1 to Version

12 steadily increased citation of global warming or the environment and reduced citation of the

economy or unemployment, though changing from "important" to "serious" did not appear to

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[8] It would not have been meaningful to add "if nothing is done to stop them" to questions asking about problems affecting the country or the world *today*, so we tested only 12 question versions instead of 16.

change answers. To more formally test the impact of each wording variation, we first conducted a logistic regression predicting citation of the economy or unemployment (coded 1 for respondents who did so and 0 for others) using dummy variables representing the question wording each respondent received (see the top panel of Table 4). Shifting from today to the future (odd ratio = .51, $p < .05$) , shifting from this country to the world (odds ratio = .42, $p < .05$), and adding "if nothing is done to stop it" (odds ratio = .68, $p < .05$) each significantly decreased the likelihood of citing these problems, but changing "important" to serious" did not (odds ratio = .89, *n.s.*). Next, we conducted a logistic regression predicting citation of global warming or the environment using dummy variables representing the question wording each respondent received (see the bottom panel of Table 4). Shifting from today to the future (odds ratio = 3.20, $p < .05$), shifting from this country to the world (odds ratio = 4.38, $p < .05$), and adding "if nothing is done to stop it" (odds ratio = 1.42, $p < .05$) each significantly increased the likelihood of citing global warming or the environment, and again, replacing "important" with "serious" did not change answers (odds ratio = .88, *n.s.*). When we added interactions between the question wording dummy variables, none were significant (all ps > .10), suggesting that each wording alteration had the same effect regardless of the other words in the question.

Conclusion

In recent decades, the traditional MIP question has consistently revealed that very few Americans named global warming or the environment as the country's most important problem, which some have viewed as evidence that Americans did not prioritize government action to address global warming or the environment (e.g., The Economist 2009). The assumptions underlying such inferences might have been correct: Americans might have focused their political energies only on problems facing this country and only on those present today.

However, we found that 76% of Americans in late 2009 wanted a lot or a great deal of government effort to be devoted to issues that will affect the world in the future if nothing is done to stop them. Thus, the traditional MIP question has not fully captured the array of agenda items to which Americans attach significance.

Supplementing the traditional MIP question with an additional question about the world's problems in the future yielded data suggesting that Americans attach more significance to global warming and the environment than the traditional question alone has revealed.   Furthermore, global warming and the environment were the most frequently mentioned problems when people were asked the new question wording. The same findings were obtained with data collected in two different modes (Internet and telephone), testifying to their robustness.

One aspect of our results resonates with findings obtained by the Gallup Organization with a question asked annually or semi-annually since 2000: "Looking ahead, what do you think will be the most important problem facing our nation 25 years from now?" (Jones 2010). Gallup has not reported a split-ballot experiment comparing responses to this question with responses to the traditional MIP question, but when their future-focused question was asked immediately after the traditional MIP question, the former question elicited more mentions of the environment and fewer mentions of economic issues, in line with the comparable finding in Study Three here. Asking Gallup's future-oriented question after the traditional question could induce a difference in answers, because respondents may experience pressure to differentiate the meanings of the two questions due to conversational conventions discouraging giving the same answer twice (see Schwarz 1996). But our split-ballot experiments show that indeed, the shift to a focus on the future does reduce economic answers and increase environmental answers. Furthermore, we

showed that these increases occur even more sharply when shifting question wording from the

U.S. to the world and when adding "if nothing is done to stop it."

Thus, the findings reported here do not suggest that the traditional MIP question is flawed.

The traditional MIP question is reasonably worded, has provided numerous valuable insights into

public opinion, and will no doubt continue to do so. However, the findings reported here suggest

that asking an additional question with different wording can enhance our understanding of

public opinion. And in this instance, the new question wording yielded support for a very

different conclusion concerning the importance of the environment and global warming to

Americans.   Therefore, alternative question wordings such as the ones tested here may make

useful additions to future national surveys that seek to track the American public's issue

priorities.

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Table 1: Problems Mentioned in Response to the Four Versions of the Most Important

Problem Question Asked in Study One

Problem	What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?	What do you think is the most important problem facing the world today?	What do you think will be the most important problem facing the world in the future?	What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it?
"The economy" / unemployment	49%	32%	21%	10%
Global warming / the environment	1%	7%	14%	25%
Health care	11%	6%	6%	5%
Government / politics	7%	7%	2%	5%
Debt / government spending	6%	2%	1%	2%
Socialism / liberalism	3%	0%	0%	2%
Morals / values	2%	3%	1%	3%
Terrorism	2%	6%	6%	10%
Iraq / Afghanistan	2%	2%	2%	0%
Poverty / hunger	2%	9%	7%	3%
Education	1%	1%	1%	0%
Racism/prejudice	1%	1%	2%	2%
Income distribution	0%	0%	1%	0%
Peace / war (in general)	1%	8%	6%	5%
Crime / drugs	0%	1%	1%	3%
Energy issues	0%	1%	7%	4%
Overpopulation	0%	1%	3%	5%
Disease / AIDS	0%	1%	1%	1%
Nuclear weapons	0%	1%	3%	2%
National security	0%	0%	0%	0%
Money / cost of living	3%	2%	3%	4%
Social security	0%	0%	0%	0%
Other	6%	7%	10%	4%
No answer	2%	1%	1%	5%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	222	237	211	236

Table 2: Problems Mentioned in Response to the Two Versions of the Most Important Problem Question Asked in Study Two

Problem	What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today? All Respondents	What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it?		
	All Respondents	All Respondents	People who wanted no effort, a little effort, or a moderate amount of effort to be devoted	People who wanted a lot or a great deal of effort to be devoted
"The economy" / unemployment	54%	16%	13%	17%
Global warming / the environment	2%	21%	11%	24%
Health care	12%	7%	5%	7%
Government / politics	4%	2%	2%	2%
Debt / government spending	5%	3%	9%	1%
Socialism / liberalism	4%	1%	2%	0%
Morals / values	5%	2%	5%	0%
Terrorism	0%	5%	4%	5%
Iraq / Afghanistan	5%	2%	1%	2%
Poverty / hunger	0%	5%	2%	6%
Education	1%	1%	0%	1%
Racism/prejudice	0%	1%	1%	0%
Income distribution	0%	0%	0%	0%
Peace / war (in general)	1%	4%	6%	4%
Crime / drugs	0%	4%	0%	5%
Energy issues	0%	2%	2%	2%
Overpopulation	0%	3%	3%	3%
Disease / AIDS	0%	1%	1%	1%
Nuclear weapons	0%	3%	5%	3%
National security	0%	1%	0%	1%
Money / cost of living	2%	3%	3%	3%
Social security	0%	0%	0%	0%
Other	2%	8%	14%	6%
No answer	1%	8%	8%	8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	501	504	140	358

Table 3. Percent Mentioning Problems in 12 Versions of the Most Important Problem Question in Study Three.

Problem	Problems today		Problems in the future		Problems in the future if nothing is done to stop them	
	Version 1: What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?	Version 2: What do you think is the most serious problem facing the country today?	Version 3: What do you think will be the most important problem facing the country in the future?	Version 4: What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the country in the future?	Version 5: What do you think will be the most important problem facing the country in the future if nothing is done to stop it?	Version 6: What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the country in the future if nothing is done to stop it?
Questions asking about "the country"						
"The economy" / unemployment	51%	46%	37%[a]	33%[a]	27%[b]	27%[b]
Global warming / the environment	1%	1%	4%[a]	3%	8%[c]	5%[a]
N	*280*	*273*	*290*	*288*	*301*	*298*

	Version 7: What do you think is the most important problem facing the world today?	Version 8: What do you think is the most serious problem facing the world today?	Version 9: What do you think will be the most important problem facing the world in the future?	Version 10: What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the world in the future?	Version 11: What do you think will be the most important problem facing the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it?	Version 12: What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it?
Questions asking about "the world"						
"The economy" / unemployment	33%[a]	29%[a]	18%[d]	15%[d]	11%[d]	13%[d]
Global warming / the environment	6%[a]	6%[a]	19%[d]	16%[d]	21%[d]	21%[d]
N	*289*	*280*	*311*	*286*	*308*	*277*

Note: [a] In separate χ^2 tests, different from Version 1 and 2 at $p < .05$; [b] Different from Version 1, 2 and 3 at $p < .05$; [c] Different from Version 1, 2, 3 and 4 at $p < .05$; [d] Different from Version 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 at $p < .05$.

Table 4. **Odds Ratios from Logistic Regressions Testing The Effects of Changes to the Most Important Problem Question on Problems Mentioned in Study Three.**

		95% Confidence interval	
Predictor	Odds ratio (SE)	Lower bound	Upper bound
Predicting mentions of "the economy" / unemployment (1 = Mentioned; 0 = Not mentioned)			
Serious (1 = Serious; 0 = Important)	0.89 (0.07)	0.76	1.04
Future (1 = Future; 0 = Today)	0.51* (0.05)	0.43	0.62
If nothing is done to stop it (1= Included; 0 = Not)	0.68* (0.07)	0.56	0.83
World (1 = World; 0 = Country)	0.42* (0.03)	0.36	0.49
Pseudo-R^2	.06		
N	3486		
Predicting mentions of global warming / the environment (1 = Mentioned; 0 = Not mentioned)			
Serious (1 = Serious; 0 = Important)	0.88 (0.11)	0.69	1.11
Future (1 = Future; 0 = Today)	3.20* (0.60)	2.22	4.62
If nothing is done to stop it (1= Included; 0 = Not)	1.42* (0.18)	1.10	1.83
World (1 = World; 0 = Country)	4.38* (0.62)	3.32	5.78
Pseudo-R^2	.10		
N	3486		

Note: * $p < .05$.

Appendix: Final Codebook

1) Global warming / climate change / greenhouse effect / Environment / pollution / air pollution / water pollution or shortages / damaging the land

2) Energy resource depletion / running out of oil / nuclear power / energy independence

3) Poverty / hunger / homelessness / lack of housing

4) Overpopulation

5) Disease / H1N1 (swine flu) / AIDS

6) Health care / uninsured / health insurance costs

7) Education

8) Economy or economic crisis / Unemployment / jobs / financial crisis, situation or instability / recession or depression, NOT MONEY OR FINANCIAL ISSUES IN GENERAL, NOT DEBT OR INFLATION

9) Deficit / debt / government spending / balanced budget / owing money to foreign nations / weakness of the dollar or inflation

10) Socialism / liberalism / liberal government / liberal President / liberal Congress

11) Government / corrupt politicians / bad politicians / political division or partisan divide / inefficiency

12) Morals / values / religion / lack of belief / straying from principles / straying from Constitution. NOT CRIME / VIOLENCE / DRUGS

13) Peace / war (general)

14) War in Iraq / War in Afghanistan / The war / The wars

15) Nuclear weapons

16) Terrorism

17) National security

18) Income distribution

19) Crime / violence / drugs / NOT GENERAL IMMORALITY

20) Money or financial issues in general / Cost of living / price of gas NOT INFLATION OR WEAKNESS OF DOLLAR

21) Social Security

22) Racism / cultural awareness / prejudice

98) No answer

99) Other