

Appendix B

The Effects of Un-Probed DKs on the Percentages Answering

Open-Ended Items Correctly

In practice, the NES interviewers failed to probe 92 of the 311 DKs in the DK-discouraging condition for Blair, 115 of the 358 for Lott, 92 of the 314 for Rehnquist, and 44 of the 175 for Reno. Some of these un-probed DKs would undoubtedly have become correct answers. To ceiling the consequences, we may assume that the un-probed would have become correct answers just as often as the probed. In that event, we should expect there to have been 5.5, 0.9, 0.8, and 6.4 additional correct responses to the Blair, Lott, Rehnquist, and Reno items, respectively. Adding these numbers to the numerator yields revised DK-discouraging percentages correct of 36.7%, 9.6%, 12.6%, and 57.1% and revised increases from the DK-neutral condition of 2.8%, 1.3%, 3.0%, and 2.4%. The mean increase is still only 2.4%.

But this is almost certainly too high. In some cases, interviewers may have neglected to probe because they were unfamiliar with these particular probes, which were new. In other cases, however, they apparently neglected to probe because they sensed that probing would be futile—often because the respondent had already clearly indicated that he or she had no idea of the answer.¹ Almost certainly, therefore, the un-probed DKs would have become correct answers at least somewhat *less* often than the probed ones did.

Note that Mondak and Davis (2001), analyzing these same data, report distinctly higher DK-discouraged percentages correct and thus distinctly larger increases over the DK-neutral percentages. According to their Table 3, the DK-discouraged percentages correct are 43.3% for Blair, 12.1% for Lott, 15.1% for Rehnquist, and 61.0% for Reno, and the corresponding

increases over the DK-neutral percentages are therefore 9.4%, 3.8%, 5.5%, , and 6.3%.² The average increase is 6.2%. This makes the impact of discouraging DKs look much greater.

But Mondak and Davis's higher numbers rest on faulty accounting. The difference between their percentages and ours is that they simply exclude the un-probed DK-discouraged DKs. Take the Blair item. Their formula is this: Count all the correct answers. Count all the incorrect answers. But discard the un-probed DKs, even though all but a small handful would have remained DK or become incorrect answers. Substantially decreasing the denominator while leaving the numerator virtually unchanged obviously boosts the percentage correct.

In effect, Mondak and Davis are assuming that the un-probed DK-responders would have got the right answer far *more* often than those who were probed. Again take the Blair item. Their computation shows 43.3% of the DK-discouraged responses as correct. For that to be right, 48.4% of the un-probed DK-responders would have to have answered correctly if probed! But of the DK-responders who *were* probed, only 6.0% actually did so—and there is reason, as we have seen, to consider that figure an upper bound for the un-probed. Pulling the 48.4% back down to 6.0% takes us back to our own too-generous estimates, averaging a mere 2.4% increase over DK-neutrality.

NOTES

¹Personal communication from Patricia Luevano, Senior Systems Analyst at the ANES.

²The 6.3% for Reno is based on 54.7% correct for Reno in the DK-neutral condition, as in Table 3 in the text. Mondak and Davis report 54.9% correct for Reno in the DK-neutral condition, because they are excluding the three refusals, which we class with the DKs. This does not affect our point.