

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, numerous 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 small number of respondents in these surveys in recent years, which might seem to suggest that these have not been the most important issues to Americans. This paper explores the possibility that an additional method of assessing the public’s priorities might support a different conclusion. 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 might include both versions of the MIP question to more fully document Americans’ priorities.

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At any moment in history, nations face complex multiplicities of problems, and choices must be made about where to devote legislative attention. Democratic policy-makers make these decisions guided partly by the polity's concerns, which legislators learn about via letters and telephone calls from constituents and via opinion polls identifying problems that the public considers most important for the country (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. Since 1950, more than 450 surveys have asked the MIP question, according to the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research's archives. The MIP question has been the focus of much research tracking trends (e.g., Smith 1980; 1985) and testing the news media agenda-setting hypothesis (e.g., Althaus and Tewksbury 2002; Holbrook and Hill 2005; McCombs 2005).

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 been mentioned most often since January of 2008, when 24% of respondents mentioned them. The economy and unemployment reached a high of 61% in January of 2009, and eased back to 48% by December of 2009.

Frequent mentioning of the economy in response to the MIP question during this period probably resulted from "real world cues" indicating that the American economy was in serious trouble (see, e.g., Behr and Iyengar 1985). The frequent mentioning of the economy may also have been a result of news media agenda-setting (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987), because the economy received far more news media attention during this time than did the environment (see Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2009a; 2009b). Frequent mentioning of the economy suggested to some observers that many Americans placed top priority on the economy during this period. For example, based on answers to the traditional MIP question, the *New York Times* (Rohter 2008) concluded that "the economic slowdown is the issue most on the minds of Americans." This conclusion seems to be based on two assumptions: (1) that the MIP question accurately identifies the problems that Americans consider to be the nation's most important, and (2) that Americans think most about the problem(s) that they believe are currently the nation's most important.

Therefore, one might infer that the absence of mentions of global warming in response to the traditional MIP question signals that it was not an issue at the top of Americans' priorities.

However, this conclusion might be premature. The traditional Gallup question focuses on problems facing only the United States and only on problems that exist today. If Americans also assign priority to solving problems that face both the U.S. and the world, and if Americans look ahead to the future and want to deal with impending threats, then answers to the traditional MIP question might only partially document public priorities and might omit worldwide problems that constitute future threats.

Consequently, supplementing the traditional MIP question with an additional question with different wording might yield a fuller picture of the public's priorities. Specifically, surveys could also ask: "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. We hypothesized that some respondents will think that a problem will be extremely serious if nothing is done to remedy it, but that society will in fact take successful steps to remedy it, so it will not in fact end up being a serious problem. So we tested 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 is designed to elicit mention of problems that people believe will be averted.

To compare the results obtained by these different question wordings, we conducted three experiments embedded in national surveys of American adults. In the first study, respondents were randomly assigned to be asked one of four different open-ended versions of an 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?"

Note that the last wording replaced the word "important" with "serious," a decision made because we thought "important" sounded less natural than "serious" in this question. A later experiment explored whether this wording change was consequential.¹

1. See the online supplement (<http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/>) for additional details on our methods and results.

Study One

RESPONDENTS

Data for our first study were collected via the Face-to-Face Recruited Internet Survey Platform (FFRISP), which involved 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 across the country to invite one randomly selected adult in each household 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), free high-speed internet access at home (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 data collection, which was launched in September, 2009; 90.6% of the 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 adjusted for features of the area-probability sample design and that included post-stratification adjustments so that the proportions of respondents in various demographic groups closely matched the true proportions in the population of American adults.

RESULTS

The first question in the questionnaire was the MIP question. Responses were coded into the categories presented in Table 1 following standard coding procedures (see online supplement).

Using only the first problem mentioned by each respondent, respondents who were asked the traditional MIP question mentioned the economy and unemployment most often (49%).² In contrast, only 1% of all respondents mentioned global warming or the environment (see column 1 of Table 1).

Across the three alternative versions of the MIP question, the proportion of people who mentioned the economy or unemployment fell steadily: 49% for the traditional question, 32% for the World question, 21% for the World/Future question, and 10% for the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question.³ Each

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; we report only the latter results for the sake of simplicity.

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 codebook in an analysis of the raw survey data and did not match the figures released by CBS News and the *New York Times*.

Table 1. First Problem 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%
Money/cost of living	3%	2%	3%	4%
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%
Peace/war (in general)	1%	8%	6%	5%
Income distribution	0%	0%	1%	0%
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%
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

of the latter three percentages was significantly different from the preceding percentage (Traditional vs. World: $\chi^2(1) = 13.40, p < .05, N = 459$; World vs. World/Future: $\chi^2(1) = 7.00, p < .05, N = 448$; World/Future vs. World/Future/Serious/Unstopped: $\chi^2(1) = 9.32, p < .05, N = 447$).

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 were significant increases (Traditional vs. World: $\chi^2(1) = 9.76, p < .05, N = 459$; World vs. World/Future: $\chi^2(1) = 5.67, p < .05, N = 448$; World/Future vs. World/Future/Serious/Unstopped: $\chi^2(1) = 8.82, p < .05, N = 447$). Thus, when asked the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question, more people mentioned global warming or the environment than any other issue. Global warming or the environment was mentioned significantly more often than the economy or unemployment, $t(236) = 14.38, p < .05$.

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.

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.⁴ All respondents were also asked

4. The second question asked of each respondent was the version of the MIP question that the respondent had not been asked initially. Consequently, every respondent was asked both versions of the question. We focus here only on answers to the first question each respondent answered, to avoid contamination of answers to the second question by answers to the first question. The figures released by the Associated Press combined responses from both groups of respondents for each question, and so they do not match those reported in this paper.

“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?”

RESULTS

Responses to the MIP questions were coded using the same procedures as were employed in Study One. Using only the first problem mentioned by each respondent, the traditional MIP question yielded frequent citations 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: 54% did so in response to the traditional question, and 16% did so for the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question, a significant difference, $\chi^2(1) = 155.20, p < .05, N = 1,005$.

The World/Future/Serious/Unstopped wording yielded a substantial increase in the proportion of respondents who mentioned global warming or the environment: 2% for the traditional question and 21% for the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question, a significant difference, $\chi^2(1) = 90.90, p < .05, N = 1,005$. So again, the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question decreased mentions of the economy and unemployment and increased mentions of global warming and the environment.

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”, 14% said “a moderate amount”, and 10% said “a little” or “none” (data not shown).

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, $\chi^2(1) = 9.75, p < .05, N = 498$ (compare columns 3 and 4 of Table 2). Global warming or the environment were mentioned most frequently by the majority of Americans who wanted large amounts of government effort to

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 codebook in an analysis of the raw survey data and do not match the figures released by CBS News and the *New York Times*.

Table 2. First Problem 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?		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%
Money/cost of living	2%	3%	3%	3%
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%
Peace/war (in general)	1%	4%	6%	4%
Income distribution	0%	0%	0%	0%
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%
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

be devoted to combating serious problems that will affect the world in the future.

Study Three

To assess which specific question wording changes were responsible for the results in Studies One and Two, we conducted a third survey experiment.

RESPONDENTS

Data were collected by Luth Research via the Internet from a national non-probability sample of American adults. A total of 164,091 panel members were invited to complete this survey, 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.⁶ 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 (Important vs. Serious) \times 2 (Future vs. Today) \times 2 (Included “if nothing is done to stop it” vs. Not included) \times 2 (Country vs. World) matrix (see Table 3 for the question wordings).

RESULTS

The first problems mentioned were coded using identical procedures as in Studies One and Two. Respondents who were asked the traditional MIP question mentioned the economy or unemployment significantly more often than did respondents who were asked the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question (51% vs. 13%, $\chi^2(1) = 94.6$, $N = 557$, $p < .05$; see Table 3). Likewise, respondents who were asked the traditional MIP question mentioned global warming or the environment significantly less 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 who were asked the traditional question, the economy or unemployment were mentioned significantly more often than were global warming or the environment, $t(279) = 15.73$, $p < .05$. And among

6. Luth Research was asked for a sample that resembled the national population demographically. Luth Research decided which demographic variables to use to produce such a sample, and Luth chose to use the 2000 Census to obtain benchmarks.

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

Question version	Problem mentioned		N
	“The economy”/ unemployment	Global warming/ the environment	
Version 1: What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?	51%	1%	280
Version 2: What do you think is the most serious problem facing the country today?	46%	1%	273
Version 3: What do you think will be the most important problem facing the country in the future?	37% ^a	4% ^a	290
Version 4: What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the country in the future?	33% ^a	3%	288
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?	27% ^b	8% ^c	301
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?	27% ^b	5% ^a	298
Version 7: What do you think is the most important problem facing the world today?	33% ^a	6% ^a	289
Version 8: What do you think is the most serious problem facing the world today?	29% ^a	6% ^a	280
Version 9: What do you think will be the most important problem facing the world in the future?	18% ^d	19% ^d	311
Version 10: What do you think will be the most serious problem facing the world in the future?	15% ^d	16% ^d	286
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?	11% ^d	21% ^d	308
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?	13% ^d	21% ^d	277

NOTE.—Numbers represent first problem mentioned by respondents

^aIn separate χ^2 tests, different from Version 1 and 2 at $p < .05$.

^bDifferent from Version 1, 2 and 3 at $p < .05$.

^cDifferent from Version 1, 2, 3 and 4 at $p < .05$.

^dDifferent from Version 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 at $p < .05$.

people who were asked the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question, significantly fewer people mentioned the economy or unemployment than mentioned global warming or the environment, $t(226) = 2.50, p < .05$.

The effects of question wording apparent in these data were the same as parallel effects shown in Studies One and Two. In separate logistic regressions predicting economy/unemployment responses and global warming/environment responses, the Sampling method (Probability vs. Non-probability) \times Question (Traditional MIP vs. World/Future/Serious) interactions were non-significant ($ps > .10$). Thus, the basic results of Studies One and Two were replicated here and were of the same size.

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 change answers (see Table 3). To test the impact of each wording variation, we first estimated the parameters of a logistic regression equation 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 that each respondent received (see the top panel of Table 4). Shifting from today to the future (discrete change in predicted probability $\Delta = -14$ percentage points, odds ratio = .51, $p < .05$), shifting from this country to the world ($\Delta = -17$ percentage points, odds ratio = .42, $p < .05$), and adding “if nothing is done to stop it” ($\Delta = -7$ percentage points, odds ratio = .68, $p < .05$) each significantly decreased the frequency of citing the economy or unemployment, but changing “important” to “serious” did not ($\Delta = -2$ percentage points, odds ratio = .89, *n.s.*).

Next, we estimated the parameters of a logistic regression equation predicting citation of global warming or the environment using dummy variables representing the question wording that each respondent received (see the bottom panel of Table 4). Shifting from today to the future ($\Delta = 6$ percentage points, odds ratio = 3.20, $p < .05$), shifting from this country to the world ($\Delta = 10$ percentage points, odds ratio = 4.38, $p < .05$), and adding “if nothing is done to stop it” ($\Delta = 2$ percentage points, odds ratio = 1.42, $p < .05$) each significantly increased the frequency of citing global warming or the environment, and again, replacing “important” with “serious” did not change answers ($\Delta = -1$ percentage point, odds ratio = .88, *n.s.*). When we added two-way interactions among the question wording dummy variables, none was 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 shown that very few Americans named global warming or the environment as the country’s most important problem, a finding replicated here. But asking a differently worded MIP question yielded different results: global warming and the

Table 4. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regressions Testing The Effects of Changes to the Most Important Problem Question on Problems Mentioned in Study Three (Standard errors from un-standardized logistic regression coefficients are in parentheses)

Predictor	Odds ratio (SE)	95% Confidence interval	
		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.— First problem mentioned by respondents. * denotes $p < .05$.

environment appear to be a much higher priority for Americans when asked about the most important or serious problem that will face the world in the future if nothing is done to stop it.

Furthermore, 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. Therefore, the new, future-oriented MIP question helps to provide a fuller picture of the 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. In fact, global warming and the environment were the most frequently mentioned problems when people were asked the new question wording.

One aspect of our results resonates with findings obtained by the Gallup Organization using 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. More generally, our findings resonate with studies that have shown that changes to format of the MIP question can shift the distributions of the answers people give (Schuman, Ludwig and Krosnick 1986).

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. Yet the findings reported here do 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.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available online at <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/>.

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