

### The left-right self-placement question in face to face and telephone surveys

Klingemann, Hans-Dieter

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Klingemann, H.-D. (1997). The left-right self-placement question in face to face and telephone surveys. In W. E. Saris, & M. Kaase (Eds.), *Eurobarometer: measurement instruments for opinions in Europe* (pp. 100-110). Mannheim: Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen -ZUMA-. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-50511-4>

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**CHAPTER 8****THE LEFT-RIGHT SELF-PLACEMENT QUESTION IN FACE TO FACE AND TELEPHONE SURVEYS***HANS-DIETER KLINGEMANN***8.1 Introduction**

In most countries in Western Europe a question concerning the left-right orientation has been regularly asked in political opinion surveys. In several countries the left right orientation has been used for explanation and prediction of party preference. For example, van de Eijk and Niemoller (1984) argue that more than 60% of the votes can be predicted correctly in the Netherlands using as predictor only the left-right scale. Similar studies have been done in other countries (Levitin and Miller, 1979).

The theoretical reason for this relationship is that the left-right schema has been used by citizens to orient themselves in a complex political world. This argument has been made by many people. This does not mean that the left-right question measures an ideological orientation of the respondents. Converse (1964; 1975) and Klingemann (1979) have shown that such an explanation cannot be given for the whole population; it probably holds mainly for the political elite.

Fuchs and Klingemann (1990) have made the argument that the left-right dimension plays such an important role in the Western European politics because it is a medium which can be used to connect all kinds of issues to the positions of parties. This is not only true for old issues like employment, salaries etc. but also postmaterialistic issues like environmental protection etc. In this way these concepts simplify for the citizen the complexity of the political spectrum and therefore these concepts also play an important role in the political systems in Western Europe. In their empirical study they found ample evidence for this phenomenon.

Given the relevance of the left-right schema in political science research, it is also important to know how this orientation can be measured and what happens to this measure if a different mode of data collection or a different formulation of the question is introduced. In this chapter, an experiment with the reformulation of the left-right question for telephone interviewing and the use of the standard question in face to face and telephone interviewing is reported.

The plan is as follows. First, the standard procedure for measuring the left-right orientation is discussed followed by the proposed alternative for telephone interviewing. Then the design of the experiment and the results which have been obtained are presented.

## 8.2 The standard measure of left right orientation

The most common way to measure left-right orientation is a question of the following format:

In political matters people talk of “the left” and “the right”.  
 How would you place your views on a scale?  
 (INTERVIEWER: SHOW CARD; DO NOT PROMPT. IF CONTACT  
 HESITATES, ASK TO TRY AGAIN)

Left										Right	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

11 No answer/refusal  
 12 DK

The formulation given here has been used in the Eurobarometer and many other studies. Data is collected many times with this question using face to face interviews in all EU countries.

Table 8.1 gives the results of the Eurobarometer 41 study for a subset of the countries.

**Table 8.1 The distribution of the responses in selected countries on the standard 10-point left-right scale in EB41.0**

Countries	The categories of the standard left-right question									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
NL	3.8	6.1	13.9	14.1	22.0	15.2	14.1	8.5	0.9	1.3
W-G	1.9	3.0	9.8	15.0	26.5	20.1	9.6	8.7	3.0	2.3
E-G	5.5	5.7	15.3	16.1	33.7	13.1	5.9	3.4	0.4	0.8
DK	1.7	3.2	12.2	12.9	21.7	10.9	15.5	17.0	3.0	1.9
IRL	2.0	1.7	5.2	9.2	40.7	15.4	11.7	7.7	5.2	1.5
GR	3.4	4.9	3.0	9.6	38.7	10.6	9.4	9.1	2.7	8.6
P	4.8	4.5	12.4	18.3	27.2	15.4	7.0	5.6	2.2	2.5

This table indicates that in these countries the left-right orientation has an unimodal distribution where category 5 has the highest frequency and the frequencies go down if the

distance from 5 becomes larger. The interpretation of this result is not completely clear. The scale is constructed in such a way that the scale has no middle category so that the category 5, the category with the highest frequency, could be seen as a category indicating an opinion leaning to the left. However, a more likely interpretation is that many people chose the fifth category as a middle category and in doing so reduce the left side of the scale to 4 points while the right side has 5 points.

It cannot be excluded that a number of people chose 6 as the middle category. That would lead to the argument that categories 5 and 6 should be put together to make a middle category. Whatever one does, one thing is clear: the distribution suggests that most people are in the middle of the scale while a limited number of people has a more extreme orientation (left or right).

In table 8.2 the data are presented for the other EU-countries.

**Table 8.2 The distribution of the responses in selected countries on the standard 10-point left-right scale in EB41.0**

Countries	The categories of the standard left-right question									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
F	5.0	6.1	17.9	11.1	27.1	10.2	11.8	5.2	3.6	2.0
B	4.0	8.9	11.4	10.7	22.0	16.6	10.0	9.6	2.8	4.0
I	7.8	9.8	12.1	9.8	23.2	12.6	7.8	8.8	3.5	4.5
Lux	1.4	2.3	12.6	10.2	39.5	17.7	5.6	7.9	1.4	1.4
GB	3.7	2.8	11.9	10.2	32.9	14.7	10.4	9.1	1.9	2.4
ESP	8.1	7.5	16.7	15.3	23.9	9.2	6.1	4.9	2.6	5.8

For these countries 5 is also the modal category, but the distributions are not unimodal any more, i.e. the frequencies are not going down regularly when the category gets farther away from the middle. Categories 3 and sometimes 7 or 8 are higher than the surrounding categories. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that in these countries left-wing parties exist with a large group of voters which identify with them. In such a situation one can expect a category at the left side with a relative high frequency. The same could be expected at the right side but such a phenomenon is only very weakly present in a few countries (for example Italy and Luxembourg).

The differences between the groups of countries in tables 8.1 and 8.2 cannot be an artefact of the data collection method because the same question format and data collection method has been used in all countries. On the other hand, one cannot be sure that the presented distributions are the correct distributions. It is possible that these results would look very different if another data collection mode or a different question would have been used. For

example, it is possible that too many people choose category 5 because the question was too difficult for them.

### 8.3 An alternative procedure

The above question using a show card is typically a procedure for a face to face interview. In telephone interviews this question with the show card cannot be used. But without the show card the question is rather complex. Therefore an alternative format has been proposed: a stepwise procedure. Such procedures have not only been suggested for this question but for several other, even simpler, questions. Groves and Kahn (1979) discuss the transformation of 7-point-category scales in what is called a stepwise procedure: first the direction is asked in three categories, and then the intensity for a specific direction. Similar experiments have been done by Sykes and Hoinville (1985) and Miller (1984). Locander and Burton (1976) and Monsees and Massey (1979) have done similar experiments for the income variable.

For the left-right scale the following stepwise procedure has been suggested:

When people talk about politics, the terms “left” and “right” are always used. We would very much like to ask you, where you put yourself, as rather “left” or rather “right?”				
Rather “left”				
Middle/neither nor (SPONTANEOUS)				
Rather “right“				
No answer/refusal				
DK				
Please imagine for a moment a scale, from 1 to 5, where 5 means very left and 1 not very left. Where would you put yourself?				
Not very left				Very left
1	2	3	4	5
Please imagine for a moment a scale, from 1 to 5, where 5 means very right and 1 not very right. Where would you put yourself?				
Not very right				Very right
1	2	3	4	5

The idea behind this formulation seems to be that people cannot respond directly to a bipolar left-right scale of 10 points but can to a 5-point scale after they have determined on what side they stand.

The problem with this question is that category 3 in both directions will probably be much larger than before, due to the stepwise procedure and the tendency of many people to choose a middle category. If this result would be obtained, it would be an artefact of the method.

On the other hand, it can also be argued that the alternative question becomes more understandable and that these results therefore are probably closer to the truth than the results obtained with the 10-point scale. It is difficult to say which argument is correct.

In this study this complex question cannot be answered. What will be assessed first of all is whether it makes a difference if the standard or the stepwise version of the left right question is used, and secondly if it is really true that people cannot use a 10-point scale in telephone interviewing.

#### 8.4 Research design

Although the alternative question was designed for telephone interviewing, it will not be used in a telephone interview because in that way two effects will be confounded: the different formulation of the question, and the different mode of data collection. In this study, the 10-point scale and the stepwise procedure will be used in two independent samples of the same populations. Such an experiment is called a split-ballot experiment (Schuman and Presser, 1981; Billiet et al., 1986). The data will be collected in a face to face-study. Besides that, a comparison will be made for the 10-point scale between a face to face study and a telephone survey. So the design of this study is as follows:

	10-point scale	Stepwise procedure
Face to face	+	+
Telephone	+	-

In the face to face interview a split-ballot experiment has been done with the question formulation. This study can show if a different distribution is obtained for the different questions. This is the only systematic difference between the two studies. So eventual differences must be due to formulation differences, except for sampling fluctuations.

The results of telephone and face to face interviews can be compared for the 10-point scale. Unfortunately, there are no repeated observations in the different modes for the 10-point scale so that coverage errors, nonresponse differences and mode differences cannot be distinguished. Only the total difference which occurs in these populations due to the difference in data collection can be compared.

The split-ballot experiment was done by INRA in the standard EB41.0 in the countries mentioned above where half of the sample got the standard question and the other half the alternative question.

The comparison between face to face and telephone interviews can be done by comparison of the INRA study with the special telephone study done by FORSA. The sample sizes in this case are also approximately the same (n=500).

## 8.5 Results

This section starts with the presentation of the results in tables 8.3 and 8.4 of the split-ballot experiment using the two versions of the left-right scale. Since stepwise procedure produces a scale with 11 points instead of 10, an adjustment had to be made in order to make the scales comparable. This has been done by putting categories 1 and 2 together so that both scales have, according to the interpretation given before, four left-side categories, one middle category and five right-side categories. In table 8.3 the results for the countries where the distribution was unimodal so far are compared.

**Table 8.3 The differences between the stepwise procedure (2S) and the standard 10-point scale (S)**

Countries	Method	The categories of the standard left-right question									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
NL	S	3.8	6.1	13.9	14.1	22.0	15.2	14.1	8.5	0.9	1.3
	2S	11.0	19.2	7.8	6.5	25.7	3.8	7.4	12.9	4.9	0.8
W-G	S	1.9	3.0	9.8	15.0	26.5	20.1	9.6	8.7	3.0	2.3
	2S	8.7	9.1	5.5	4.1	54.8	1.9	4.3	7.9	2.2	1.4
E-G	S	5.5	5.7	15.3	16.1	33.7	13.1	5.9	3.4	0.4	0.8
	2S	10.5	17.2	6.7	5.3	49.6	3.3	1.2	4.8	1.2	0.2
DK	S	1.7	3.2	12.2	12.9	21.7	10.9	15.5	17.0	3.0	1.9
	2S	6.1	12.0	6.6	6.8	27.7	2.5	10.4	17.2	5.9	2.7
IRL	S	2.0	1.7	5.2	9.2	40.7	15.4	11.7	7.7	5.2	1.5
	2S	5.3	7.8	4.8	4.8	49.3	2.2	2.8	9.5	9.5	3.9
GR	S	3.4	4.9	3.0	9.6	38.7	10.6	9.4	9.1	2.7	8.6
	2S	4.3	5.9	2.7	5.1	45.0	4.8	7.0	15.8	4.8	4.6
P	S	4.8	4.5	12.4	18.3	27.2	15.4	7.0	5.6	2.2	2.5
	2S	9.3	15.2	10.1	2.5	34.4	2.3	7.6	9.3	7.3	2.0

In each country presented in this table the differences between the two distributions for the two forms of the left-right question are highly significant. Even more so, these countries have been reported in table 8.1 as countries for which the distributions were unimodal in contrast to the countries of table 8.2 where the distributions were at least bimodal. According to table 8.3, in all countries the stepwise question procedure leads to a distribution with three peaks: the highest for the value 5 and two lower but clearly detectable ones for categories 2 and 8. Since the only difference between the two studies is the question formulation one has to conclude that these differences are due to the formulation of the question and therefore artefacts.

On the other hand, this does not mean that the correct distribution is known, as was mentioned before. But before entering this debate, also the effects which occur in the countries where already a bimodal distribution existed will be scrutinized. For these countries the results have been summarised in table 8.4.

**Table 8.4 The differences between the stepwise procedure (2S) and the standard 10-point scale (S) in EU41.0 for selected countries**

Countries	Method	The categories of the standard left-right question									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
F	S	5.0	6.1	17.9	11.1	27.1	10.2	11.8	5.2	3.6	2.0
	2S	15.8	12.8	9.0	2.7	29.7	2.0	5.2	12.8	6.8	3.2
B	S	4.0	8.9	11.4	10.7	22.0	16.6	10.0	9.6	2.8	4.0
	2S	8.0	9.7	6.9	1.7	50.5	3.6	3.6	7.4	4.8	3.8
I	S	7.8	9.8	12.1	9.8	23.2	12.6	7.8	8.8	3.5	4.5
	2S	17.9	10.3	4.6	2.2	31.2	1.9	4.9	10.3	10.2	6.5
Lux	S	1.4	2.3	12.6	10.2	39.5	17.7	5.6	7.9	1.4	1.4
	2S	4.7	12.2	4.3	3.9	56.7	3.1	3.5	7.5	1.2	2.8
GB	S	3.7	2.8	11.9	10.2	32.9	14.7	10.4	9.1	1.9	2.4
	2S	8.6	10.8	5.2	1.9	53.4	1.5	4.5	9.1	3.2	1.7
ESP	S	8.1	7.5	16.7	15.3	23.9	9.2	6.1	4.9	2.6	5.8
	2S	18.4	16.8	7.2	2.8	28.7	2.2	5.0	10.6	4.7	3.7

Also in this case the distribution in all countries significantly differs from each other in that the distribution as a whole shifted to the left side. Categories 1 and 2 are often more than twice as large as before, and people say less frequently that they are right-wing oriented. On



the other hand, there clearly is a peak in category 8 which was not there when using the 10-point scale. So, also in this table considerable differences between the distributions emerge which cannot be due to any other cause than the formulation of the question.

The general conclusion based on these results is that one cannot change the question on left-right orientation in the way it has been done above because the results will be absolutely incomparable. This also means that one cannot use the stepwise procedure in telephone surveys as the equivalent form for the standard 10-point scale in face to face interviewing.

These findings lead to the second question of this study: Does one have to change the formulation of the question if telephone interviewing is used?

The answer is of course 'yes' because one cannot use a show card. Without a show card, the question must be raised whether explaining the 1 to 10 scale where 1 is left and 10 is right, on the phone is enough to enable people to answer this question.

The only way to obtain an answer in this study is to look at the nonresponse and DK answers to the different questions in the different data collection modes and at the distribution of the responses again to see if large differences are found between the different modes.

Starting with the nonresponse or no answers, table 8.5 shows the results.

**Table 8.5 The nonresponse and DK/No answer in the different questions and in the different modes in EB41.0 and FORSA in 12 EU countries**

	<b>EB41.0 stepwise face to face</b>	<b>EB 41.0 standard face to face</b>	<b>FORSA</b>
DK/No answer/ Refusal	21	16	15
Answer	79	84	85
N	6704	6706	6650

In contrast to the predictions, the number of DK/No answer responses are the lowest for the standard 10-point scale in telephone interviewing. The second best is the 10-point scale in face to face interviewing, and the worst is the question which has been suggested as the presumed solution for the problems of the standard 10-point scale. More precise analysis of the responses indicates that almost all DK/No answer or refusal responses relate to the first question in the two-step procedure which compels people to make a choice between left and right.

Furthermore, the data give no indication that the standard question is more difficult for the people on the telephone than in a face to face study with a show card. It seems that this card is not needed for getting a response.

This does not mean that a change in the mode of data collection does not have an effect on the responses. These effects can be seen in tables 8.6 and 8.7.

Table 8.6 shows for the countries with a unimodal distribution in the face to face study that the change of mode also leads to differences between the distributions, but these differences are much smaller. If a test is done at a 5% level, the results in the Netherlands, East Germany and Denmark are not significant, while at the 1% level the results in Ireland and Greece are not significant, too. Larger differences occur in West Germany and Portugal. In both countries the most likely middle category 5 is increased and the end points of the scale contain more cases than before. This can indicate a response behaviour of people who have problems with the scale. Possible solutions are to mention the middle or the end points of the scale. Nevertheless, the differences are relatively small, and the pattern that the most people are in the middle and that farther away from the middle fewer people can be found still holds, except in many cases for the lowest and the highest category which suggest in general the pattern mentioned before.

**Table 8.6 The differences between the response on the 10-point scale in face to face (F) and telephone interviewing (T) for the countries of table 8.1**

Countries	Mode	The categories of the standard left-right question									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
NL	F	3.8	6.1	13.9	14.1	22.0	15.2	14.1	8.5	0.9	1.3
	T	2.8	3.5	15.1	14.9	26.8	12.5	14.5	5.7	1.2	3.0
W-G	F	1.9	3.0	9.8	15.0	26.5	20.1	9.6	8.7	3.0	2.3
	T	3.9	4.5	11.6	11.9	40.4	12.2	7.2	3.9	0.0	4.4
E-G	F	5.5	5.7	15.3	16.1	33.7	13.1	5.9	3.4	0.4	0.8
	T	5.5	4.8	19.0	17.1	35.6	10.1	4.0	2.4	0.0	1.5
DK	F	1.7	3.2	12.2	12.9	21.7	10.9	15.5	17.0	3.0	1.9
	T	2.5	3.6	10.3	13.0	25.5	12.0	14.3	11.7	3.2	3.9
IRL	F	2.0	1.7	5.2	9.2	40.7	15.4	11.7	7.7	5.2	1.5
	T	4.7	2.5	4.8	5.9	35.6	18.0	13.5	9.2	2.6	3.4
GR	F	3.4	4.9	3.0	9.6	38.7	10.6	9.4	9.1	2.7	8.6
	T	8.2	2.9	5.6	10.1	36.1	9.3	8.0	10.3	2.9	6.7
P	F	4.8	4.5	12.4	18.3	27.2	15.4	7.0	5.6	2.2	2.5
	T	12.1	3.2	8.7	7.1	38.8	8.1	5.8	4.5	2.2	9.4

**Table 8.7 The differences between the response on the 10-point scale in face to face and telephone interviewing for the countries of table 8.2**

Countries		The categories of the standard left-right question									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Mode											
F	F	5.0	6.1	17.9	11.1	27.1	10.2	11.8	5.2	3.6	2.0
	T	4.3	2.5	8.5	13.7	35.1	12.7	10.0	8.2	2.6	2.4
B	F	4.0	8.9	11.4	10.7	22.0	16.6	10.0	9.6	2.8	4.0
	T	2.2	3.6	9.2	8.0	40.5	13.7	11.8	5.1	1.4	4.6
I	F	7.8	9.8	12.1	9.8	23.2	12.6	7.8	8.8	3.5	4.5
	T	7.1	2.0	9.6	10.5	29.1	9.5	10.6	7.5	2.6	11.4
Lux	F	1.4	2.3	12.6	10.2	39.5	17.7	5.6	7.9	1.4	1.4
	T	4.4	2.0	9.9	11.3	44.7	9.1	10.1	3.3	1.2	4.1
GB	F	3.7	2.8	11.9	10.2	32.9	14.7	10.4	9.1	1.9	2.4
	T	3.0	2.9	10.1	10.6	39.0	13.5	9.4	7.1	1.6	2.9
ESP	F	8.1	7.5	16.7	15.3	23.9	9.2	6.1	4.9	2.6	5.8
	T	15.5	3.7	8.9	8.7	26.6	5.9	9.1	5.9	1.5	14.2

With respect to the group of countries which had a bimodal distribution for the 10-point scale in face to face interviews the results have been summarised in table 8.7.

Larger differences are found in this table. In this case all differences are significant except for Great Britain. In all countries the same tendency emerges which was mentioned before that the middle category 5 and/or the lowest and the highest categories have been chosen more frequently than before. As a consequence, the other categories got fewer cases, and this led to the disappearance of the bimodal feature of the distribution in 4 out of the 6 countries discussed in table 8.2. Thus the change of the mode of data collection has the opposite effect of the change in question formulation. The stepwise procedure caused an increase of bimodal or trimodal distributions while the change of mode made them disappear.

## 8.6 Conclusion

One has to conclude that the differences in responses to a left-right scale between telephone and face to face interviews are less than the differences for the change of formulation of the question but, nevertheless, they are large enough to cause problems with respect to the comparison of the responses across modes.

One also has to admit that it looks as if a number of people cannot cope with the 10-point scale on the telephone and opted for simple solutions like the middle category or 1 or 10. But this result can have also been caused by other reasons. For instance, it might be an effect of a

coverage error, but it can also be due to the selection which occurred by the procedures used by the different organisations. Possibly less sophisticated people are reached by telephone and they have more difficulty with this scale on the telephone. Only further research can clarify this issue.

The alternative question using a stepwise procedure does not seem to be a wise choice. It has been shown that the number of people who do not give an answer to this question is higher than for the standard question, both face to face and telephone. Besides that, this alternative formulation leads to a very different distribution of the responses than the standard question. It is not clear which distribution is the correct one, but for purposes of comparison these two questions are not equivalent. So the stepwise procedure is not recommended for telephone interviewing.