**Taking a closer look:**

**Counterarguments in survey research**

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**By Thomas R. Marshall**

**Political Science Department, The University of Texas at Arlington -- *tmarshall@uta.edu***

**Abstract**

*Counterarguments are an often used but little studied question format in survey research. In this format a respondent offers an opinion to a question, and depending upon that answer, is then asked one or more additional questions each offering information that might cause the respondent to switch his or her earlier answer. In past studies of political tolerance a third to a half of respondents typically switched their original answer. This paper reviews all the identifiable counterarguments from the iPOLL archive and reports that switching is also common across other topics, occurs about equally often across different issues, and occurs most often on low-visibility issues, if the respondent either favored or gave a politically liberal answer to the earlier question, and if multiple counterarguments are asked of a respondent.*

**Introduction**

Counterarguments are not a new question format in survey research, but remain little examined. In the counterargument format a respondent is first asked his or her position (the “prior question”). Depending upon that answer the respondent is either immediately or else several questions later asked one or more questions that contain seemingly conflicting information and asked whether he or she still takes the earlier-given answer or else would now change answers. Together the prior question and the later counterargument comprise a “cluster” of questions making up the counterargument format. For example, in a March 2017 survey by Kaiser Family Foundation respondents were initially asked if they supported or opposed a requirement that “*all private health plans must include coverage for maternity care*.” Those who initially supported the requirement were then asked “*(W)hat if you heard that the requirement … means some people have to pay for benefits they do not use?*” Those who initially opposed the requirement were asked *“(W)hat if you heard that without a requirement … policies that do include maternity care would become very expensive and unaffordable for some people who need maternity service?*” In this instance 28% of those initially in support switched to opposition, don’t know, or refuse, while 43% of those initially in opposition switched to support, don’t know, or refuse.

The earliest counterarguments in the iPOLL archive are from a September 1939 Roper survey for *Fortune* magazine. The first Gallup counterargument appears in a September 1950 survey. Only scattered examples appear until the 1970s when computer-assisted telephone interviewing made asking counterarguments easier. By the mid-1970s, if not even earlier, political campaign polls and market research surveys often incorporated counterarguments to identify persuasive messages.

Beginning in the 1990s academics began to incorporate counterarguments, particularly in studying political tolerance and racial attitudes. Results from the United States, Russia, South Africa, Denmark, and Canada point to three conclusions. First, presented with counterarguments, many respondents will change their position within the same survey, with switching rates averaging one-third to one-half of respondents and ranging from a low of one-tenth to a high of three-fifths of respondents (Fletcher and Chalmers 1991; Gibson 1998; Peffley, Knigge, and Hurwitz 2001; Peterson et al. 2011; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Sniderman et al. 1996; Tate 2003). Second, switching is more common among those who were initially tolerant toward unpopular or controversial groups rather than among those who were initially intolerant (Gibson 1998; Gibson and Gouws 2002; Peffley, Knigge, and Hurwitz 2001; see also Marcus et al. 1995; Sullivan et al. 1993). Third, switching is most common among respondents whose initial attitudes were less strongly held or more conflicted or if the target group queried was perceived as violent or unconventional (Pefley, Knigge, and Hurwitz 2001; Peterson et al. 2011). This paper asks whether these findings are unique to political tolerance and racial attitudes, or whether they accurately describe counterarguments more broadly.

**Methods**

The on-line iPOLL archive was searched for all identifiable counterarguments, using key phrases and words comonly used in this format such as “*what if you heard*,” “*what if you knew*,” “*what if this meant that*,” “*after hearing this*,” “*still*,” “*suppose*,” or “*now*.” A total of 138 clusters were so identified which include 287 counterargument questions.

These 287 counterargument questions vary widely by issue. The most common topics include health care (54% of all counterargument questions), military conflicts (12%), retirement and social security (7%), the federal budget and spending (7%), and world affairs (7%). Kaiser, Gallup, CBS/*New York Times*, and Harris Poll asked the largest number of counterargument questions. About half of these 138 clusters include two counterargument questions, that is, one apiece for the initial “*favor*” or “*oppose*” position; the remaining clusters include either multiple counterarguments or else only a single counterargument question for the prior question.

**Results**

Switching is common across all topics and at rates similar to those found for political tolerance and racial attitudes. Across all these counterargument questions the rate of switching ranges from a low of 2% to a high of 86%, and averages 38% (S.D. 17%). For the most common topics the average switching rates are 38% on health care, 37% for military conflicts, 35% for retirement and social security, 50% for the federal budget and spending, 37% for world affairs, and 35% for miscellaneous other topics (S.D. 15%, 19%, 12%, 22%, 21%, and 17%, respectively). Given that switching is frequent and about equally so across topics, what best explains switching rates? This paper tests three explanations for switching – first, the respondent’s initial position on the prior question; second, the counterargument question format; and third, survey artifacts.

The first type of explanation tested to explain switching rates includes four measures of respondent attitudes: a respondent’s initial ideological position, support or opposition on the prior question, the respondent’s strength of attitude, and (indirectly measured) respondents’ level of interest***.*** For respondents who initially took a politically liberal position, an average of 40% switched; for respondents who initially took a conservative position an average of 37% switched (both S.D.s of 16% ; N.S. at .05). This result weakly reflects the pattern of liberals more often switching, a pattern widely reported in the existing literature on political tolerance and racial attitudes; however, the differences are not statistically significant. For respondents who initially favored the prior question, predicted as linked to higher switching rates (Schuman and Presser 1981), the average switching rate is 41%, versus 33% among those who initially opposed the prior question (S.D. 17% and 13%, respectively; significant at .01).

On about half of these clusters the respondent was initially asked whether he or she strongly or only somewhat favored or opposed the initial question. For these questions the Pearson product-moment correlation between the percent strongly holding an initial position and the percent switch rate is -.16 (marginally significant at .1). This pattern weakly reflects past results elsewhere.

Although respondents were almost never queried about their level of interest in the topics asked here, an indirect measure of respondent attitudes is available using Gallup’s timeliest reading of the public’s “*most important problem*” concerns. Using the Gallup measure the Pearson product-moment correlation between interest in the topic and the percent switch rate was -.15 (significant at .1). Summarizing so far, a respondent’s initial position on the issue, initial attitude strength, and estimated level of interest are at least modestly linked to switching, particularly so whether the respondent favored or opposed the prior question.

The second type of explanation for switching tests the impact of question format. Switching rates were examined by three types of arguments offered in the counterargument. If the counterargument mentions a political party or a highly visible political figure (typically a president), the average switching rate is 38%, versus a 38% switching rate if no such mention is made (S.D. 16% and 21% respectively; N.S.). If the counterargument explicitly mentions death, illness, or disease, the average switching rate is 37%, versus 39% with no such mention (S.D. of 16% and 17% respectively; N.S.). If the counterargument explicitly mentions a financial cost or expense the average switching rate is 39%, versus 38% with no such mention (S.D. both 17% N.S.).

On about half of these clusters, only one counterargument was read to a respondent, but for many clusters respondents were asked two or more counterarguments. The number of counterarguments previously read to a respondent is strongly related to the switch rate with a Pearson product moment correlation of .33 (significant at .001). Further, the relationship is strongly linear. If no counterarguments were previously asked, the switch rate is 36%. If just one counterargument was previously asked, the switch rate jumps to 41%. The switch rate rises steadily to 65% if six counterarguments were previously asked. Stated otherwise, each additional counterargument previously read adds about five percent to the switch rate. This may suggest that respondents are additively considering the counterarguments presented. Further experimental research would be welcome.

The third explanation for switching involves three possible survey artifacts. If an explicit “*don’t know*” option was provided in the prior question, switching rates averaged 37%, versus 38% if no such option was provided (S.D. 15% and 17% respectively; N.S.). As a caveat, modern polling seldom offers an explicit “*don’t know*” option and only five prior questions did so. If the counterargument immediately follows the prior question, switching rates average 36%, versus 41% if one or more (typically, several) intervening questions are asked before the counterargument (S.D. 15% and 18%, respectively; significant at .05). If the prior question is read near the beginning of the survey (that is, within the first five questions), the switching rate averages 31%, versus 40% if the prior question was read later in the survey (S.D. 14% and 17%, respectively; significant at .05).

As a final step these predictors were singly and in combination tested in a multivariate model to explain switching rates and using a wide variety of interactive effects. Slightly the strongest multivariate model includes just two variables: the number of prior counterarguments read to the respondent and whether the respondent originally favored the prior question. In this two-predictor model the predicted switching rate is 32.1% + 3.65% (times the number of prior counterarguments) + 5.4% (if the respondent initially favored the prior question). The adjusted R-2 is .13; the constant and number of prior counterarguments are significant at .001; the initial favor variable is significant at .01.

Nearly as strong a model is another two-predictor model substituting the liberal-conservative ideology on the prior question for the favor/oppose response. Here the predicted switching rate is 33.8% + 3.92% (times the number of prior counterarguments) + 4.1% (if the respondent gave a liberal answer to the prior question) with an adjusted R-2 of .12, an adjusted R-2 of .11; the constant and number of counterargument variables are significant at .001 with the ideology variable significant at .05. Alternatively, including Gallup’s “*most important proble*m” variable is a third viable model at 37.7% + 3.85% (times the number of prior counterarguments) -.212 (times the percentage indicating a most important problem); the adjusted R-2 is .12; the constant and number of prior counterarguments are significant at .001 with the MIP variable significant at .05. No other additional variables or interaction effects improve upon these models.

**Conclusion**

This paper offers two important findings. First, counterarguments frequently lead survey respondents to switch their answers and do so across many different survey topics. Past findings on switching rates for political tolerance and racial attitudes are not atypical. Across the wide range of issues examined here, an average of 38% of respondents switched their initial positions with strikingly similar results across issues. This figure provides a useful baseline by which to assess if switching rates are unusually high, only average, or significantly lower-than-average, and an empirically-based standard by which to judge which counterarguments are “strong” versus “weak.”

Second, these results suggest that although switching is very common, significantly higher-than-average rates of switching occur only under a few conditions. Switching rates are higher if one or more counterarguments were already asked of the respondent, higher if respondents earlier gave either a liberal or “*favor*” answer on the prior question, and higher on issues of little public concern. Several other seemingly plausible explanations for switching are not significantly linked to switching. These findings usefully extend past studies that examined individual respondent traits, but did not examine switching rates across issues, across arguments, or across survey artifacts.

Finally, this study has some limitations. All these counterarguments are from an American setting and all tap attitudes on public policies. None tap switching rates during election campaigns, for commercial products or services, or for specific political leaders or public institutions or the media. Nor was it possible to test for several other variables that might also explain higher switching rates such as a respondent’s prior amount of information, happy/sad mood, attentiveness, or the prestige or likeability of the communicator. Further experimental research can usefully examine these issues.

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