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 tiny 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, 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 via letters and telephone calls from constituents and via 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. Since 1950, more than 450 surveys have asked the MIP question, according to the archives of the University of Connecticut's Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. The MIP question has been the focus of a great deal of 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). Furthermore, methodological investigations have compared answers to

the open-ended MIP question with a closed-ended version in terms of the degree to which

responses are influenced by issue 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 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, 2009, and eased back to 48% by December, 2009.

The frequent mentions of the economy in response to the MIP question during this period

are likely to have resulted from "real world cues" indicating that the American economy was in

serious trouble (see, e.g., Behr & Iyengar, 1985), and perhaps from news media agenda-setting

(e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1985) as well, because the economy received much more news media

attention during this time than did the environment and many other issues (see Pew Research

Center for the People and the Press, 2009a; 2009b). And these frequent mentions have 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 identifies the

problems that Americans consider to be the nation's most important, and that (2) 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 may focus 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. Some people might generate an answer to this question by thinking in the following fashion: "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 avoid preventing mentions of problems that people assume will be addressed successfully and collecting mentions only of problems that people believe are unlikely to be averted.

With all this in mind, we conducted three experiments embedded in national surveys of

American adults to explore whether a new question wording would yield a different portrait of Americans' issue priorities, particularly regarding global warming and the environment. 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.

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) and 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.

ANALYSIS

The first question in the questionnaire was the MIP question, and respondents were

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

categories following standard coding procedures. To develop the list of coding 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 of our initial

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).

Using this codebook, responses to the open-ended questions were assigned to coding

categories in multiple steps. The coders who did this work had not participated in the creation of

the codebook and were blind to the question wording that each respondent had been asked and to

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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.
Thus, we divided financial issues into the following categories: (a) "the economy" /
unemployment, (b) individuals' costs of living, (c) government debt and spending, (d) poverty,
and (e) general income inequality.

the hypotheses being tested in the study. First, two coders independently decided whether each

respondent mentioned only one problem or more than one problem. In each instance when a

coder believed that multiple problems had been mentioned by a respondent, the coder divided

that respondent's answer into individual problems. The two coders made identical decisions

about the number of problems mentioned and the division of the problems for 830 respondents

out of the total of 906 respondents (92%).[2] For the remaining 76 respondents, the two coders

decided collaboratively how the responses should be divided into individual problems. This

process yielded the following results: 24 respondents 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 (who

were 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.

During this step, the coders independently assigned 89% of the 906 individual problems to the

same category (Cohen's κ = .88; Krippendorff's α = .88; Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). The

coders then worked together to decide the category to which to assign each of the remaining 99

problems. A final editing process corrected a few miscodings.

RESULTS

Using only the first problem mentioned by each respondent, respondents who has been

asked the traditional MIP question mentioned the economy and unemployment most often

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[2] Cohen's κ, Krippendorff's α, and other such measures were not computed to assess reliability in the first step, because a very large proportion of respondents mentioned only one problem, and in such cases, reliability statistics that adjust for chance agreement such as Cohen's κ or Krippendorff's α are overly-conservative (Lombard 2008; see also Lombard, Snyder-Duch and Bracken 2002).

(48%).[3] In contrast, only 1% of all respondents mentioned global warming or the environment

(see column 1 of Table 1).[4]

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

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[3] 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.
[4] 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.

number of people mentioned global warming or the environment than mentioned the economy or

unemployment, a significant difference, $t(236) = 14.38, p < .05$.

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. 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. [5] All respondents were also asked "How much effort

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[5] 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

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?"

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 ($\kappa = .82$; $\alpha = .82$).

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).[6]

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, χ^2 (1)

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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.

[6] 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.

= 155.20, $p < .05$, $N = 1,005$.

As in Study One, the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped wording yielded a substantial 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, $\chi^2 (1) = 90.09$, $p < .05$, $N = 1,005$. So again, the World/Future/Serious/Unstopped question decreased mentions of the economy and unemployment and increased mentions of global warming and the environment.[7]

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.

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[7] 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.*

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. This experiment assessed whether the increase in citation of global warming or the environment and the decrease in citation of economic issues 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.[8] 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.[9] 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.

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[8] 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 sent by businesses or non-profit organizations with which potential panelist had an affiliation.

[9] 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.

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) × 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).[10]

ANALYSIS

The first problems mentioned were coded using identical procedures as in Studies One and Two. Agreement between coders for each step exceeded 90% (For step two: $\kappa = .88$; $\alpha >$ .88).

RESULTS

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%, $\chi^2(1) = 94.6$, $N = 557$, $p < .05$). 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 (51% vs. 1%, $t(279) = 15.73$, $p < .05$). And among 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 (13% vs. 21%, $t(226) = 2.50$, $p < .05$). Thus, the basic

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[10] 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.

results of Studies One and Two were replicated here (see Table 3).

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 change answers. To more formally 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 each respondent received (see the top panel of Table 4). Shifting from today to the future (discrete change in predicted probability Δ_{future} = -.14 percentage points, odds ratio = .51, $p < .05$), shifting from this country to the world (Δ_{world} = -.17 percentage points, odds ratio = .42, $p < .05$), and adding "if nothing is done to stop it" (Δ_{stopit} = -.07 percentage points, odds ratio = .68, $p < .05$) each significantly decreased the likelihood of citing the economy or unemployment, but changing "important" to serious" did not ($\Delta_{serious}$ = -.02 percentage points, odds ratio = .89, $n.s.$). Next, we estimated the parameters of 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 (Δ_{future} =.06 percentage points, odds ratio = 3.20, $p < .05$), shifting from this country to the world (Δ_{world} =.10 percentage points, odds ratio = 4.38, $p < .05$), and adding "if nothing is done to stop it" (Δ_{stopit} =.02 percentage points, 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 ($\Delta_{serious}$ = -.01 percentage points, 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 found that very few Americans named global warming or the environment as the country's most important problem, a finding we replicated here in multiple studies. But we also found that asking a differently worded MIP question yielded different results: global warming and the environment appear to be much higher in priority to Americans when they are 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. The same findings were obtained with data collected in two different modes (Internet and telephone), testifying to their robustness.

We found similar results regarding the impact of question wording using data from two probability samples of American adults and from a non-probability sample that resembled the nation in terms of some core demographics. When we explicitly tested whether the effects of question wording differed across sample types, we found that they did not. In separate logistic regressions predicting economy/unemployment responses and global warming/environment

responses, the Sampling method (Probability vs. Non-probability) × Question (Traditional MIP vs. World/Future/Serious) interactions were non-significant (*ps* > .10). This result is consistent with an assumption made by some researchers: that experimental findings are likely to be similar using probability and non-probability samples (see, e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1996). If the probability and non-probability samples differ in terms of a moderator variable that governs the result of an experiment, this similarity of results will not be obtained. So the similarity we observed suggests that no such moderator differed between the probability and non-probability samples that we examined.

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 to the former, because of conversational conventions (see Schwarz 1996) or a variety of other psychological processes (see, e.g., Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988). But our split-ballot experiments showed 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. 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.

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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%
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: 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? 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	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.

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. [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	0.76	1.04
	(0.07)		
Future (1 = Future; 0 = Today)	0.51*	0.43	0.62
	(0.05)		
If nothing is done to stop it (1= Included; 0 = Not)	0.68*	0.56	0.83
	(0.07)		
World (1 = World; 0 = Country)	0.42*	0.36	0.49
	(0.03)		
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	0.69	1.11
	(0.11)		
Future (1 = Future; 0 = Today)	3.20*	2.22	4.62
	(0.60)		
If nothing is done to stop it (1= Included; 0 = Not)	1.42*	1.10	1.83
	(0.18)		
World (1 = World; 0 = Country)	4.38*	3.32	5.78
	(0.62)		
Pseudo-R^2	.10		
N	3486		

Note: First problem mentioned by respondents. * $p < .05$.

Appendix: Final Categories used for Coding of Responses to MIP Questions

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