

# Evaluating the cross-national comparability of survey measures of political interest using anchoring vignettes



Seonghui Lee, Nick C.N. Lin, Randolph T. Stevenson\*

Rice University, 6100 Main St., Houston, TX 77005, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Making cross-groups comparisons by using survey instruments has raised substantial scholarly concerns due to the potential risk of incomparability resulting from differential item functioning (DIF). However, not every survey item necessarily suffers from DIF. In this paper, we argue that, unlike many other survey items (e.g., political efficacy), the usual question used to measure political interest is likely to be largely immune to DIF. Our theoretical argument centers on the relative specificity of the item and a corresponding cultural homogeneity (at least in advanced democracies) in what it means to be politically interested or not. Utilizing the anchoring vignettes technique (King et al., 2004; King and Wand, 2007) in our original surveys in the UK, France, and the Netherlands, we demonstrate the size of DIF is small for the standard political interest question.

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## 1. Introduction

Political interest is one of the most important concepts in the study of political behavior. It predicts core aspects of democratic citizenship such as political knowledge and information acquisition (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Luskin, 1990; Prior, 2005) and participation (e.g., Brady et al., 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Powell, 1986). Further, levels of interest in politics appear to vary dramatically across countries, even when comparisons are confined to countries with similar levels of economic and democratic development (e.g., OECD countries). For example, Fig. 1 provides the average responses by respondents in 135 surveys (spanning 34 western countries over ten years) to the question: “How interested would you say you are in politics?”<sup>1</sup> The y-axis

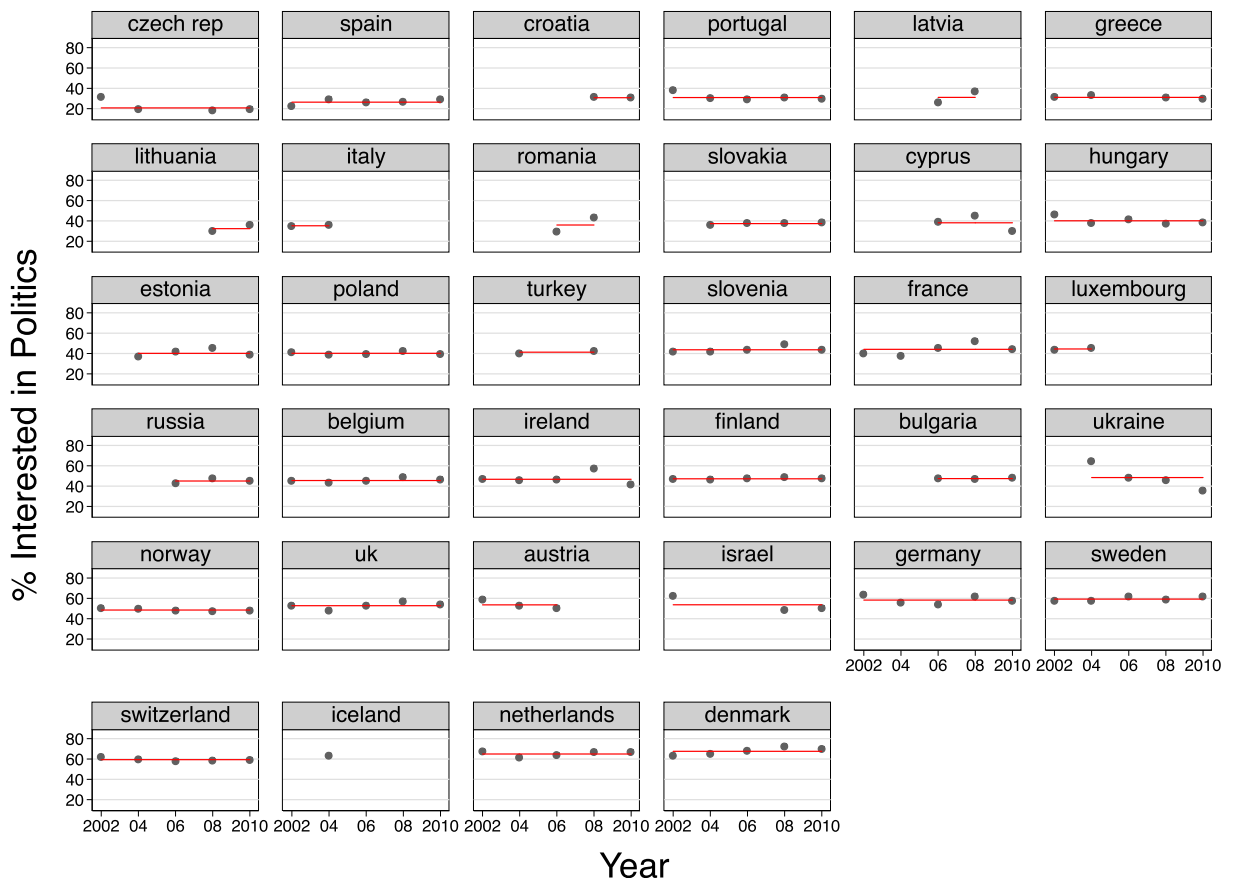
indicates the proportion of the respondents who reported that they were “Very” or “Quite” interested in politics and the graphs are ordered from countries with the least interested populace to those with the most. There is a great deal of variation in the average levels of interest across countries, ranging from 21% of the Czechs interested in politics to 68% of the Danes. Even if one limits the cases to the Western European democracies, the difference between the nations with the most (Denmark) and least interested populace (France at 44% interested) is still about 25 percentage points.

Besides the rather large differences in average political interest across countries, the graph also reveals another important regularity: the vast majority of the variance in political interest depicted in the figure occurs across countries, rather than within the same country over time. This strongly suggests that explanations for these differences are to be found in enduring differences across countries rather than in factors that vary from year to year or election to election. Indeed, given this pattern of variation, several scholars have proposed partial explanations

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [seonghui.lee@rice.edu](mailto:seonghui.lee@rice.edu) (S. Lee), [nicklin@rice.edu](mailto:nicklin@rice.edu) (N.C.N. Lin), [stevenso@rice.edu](mailto:stevenso@rice.edu) (R.T. Stevenson).

<sup>1</sup> There are 4 answer categories ranging from “Very” to “Not at all” interested. The surveys are from the European Social Surveys series.



**Fig. 1.** Self-reported interest in politics over time and across countries. Note: Y-axis: % Quite Interested + Very Interested; Horizontal lines indicate country means over surveys.

for cross-national differences in political interest and knowledge, rooted in corresponding differences in electoral systems (Gordon and Segura, 1997; Grönlund and Milner, 2006), government policies (Milner, 2002), and the availability of common political heuristics (Lee and Stevenson, 2015).

Of course, this pattern of variation (across rather than within countries) is also consistent with another explanation: perhaps individuals in different countries consistently interpret the political interest question in different ways. For example, if a typical Spanish respondent thinks a high level of political interest means attending weekly political meetings while a typical German respondent thinks a high level of political interest means reading about politics in the newspaper occasionally, then the large difference in average interest between the countries that is depicted in Fig. 1 would not stem from substantive differences in the way these countries' cultures and institutions shape individuals' political interest, but instead from the use of a cross-nationally incomparable question to measure them.

This kind of "Differential Item Functioning" (DIF) across countries has been demonstrated for many other important

political and social concepts measured in cross-national surveys (e.g., political efficacy, political trust, health assessment, job satisfaction, etc.). To date, however, none of the work exploring or even simply describing contextual differences in political interest has analyzed this possibility.

This paper is an attempt to remedy this problem. Specifically, we use King et al.'s (2004) "anchoring vignettes" methodology along with original surveys that we commissioned in three countries – France, the Netherlands, and the UK – to explore whether the kinds of differences depicted in Fig. 1 are simply the result of differences in the way survey respondents in different countries interpret typical political interest questions.

A study like this one is, we think, also particularly valuable because of the largely unappreciated fact that there is a wealth of cross-national survey data on political interest that goes back decades. Further, when one looks closely at the survey questions used in these surveys one finds a remarkable degree of consistency in the wording of the different questions used to tap political interest, as well as in the ordinal answer categories provided to respondents. Thus, we think that there is at

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