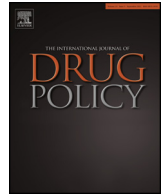




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Research methods

Does it matter how you ask? The forbid–allow asymmetry in the measurement of attitudes towards drug policies



Jostein Rise*, Torleif Halkjelsvik

Norwegian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Background: It is important to know whether the public opinion on drug policies can be measured in a reliable and valid way. One of the threats to the validity of surveys on attitudes toward drug policies are wording effects, of which the most well-known is the forbid–allow asymmetry, i.e., people are often more willing to *not allow* something than to *forbid* it. The aim of the present study was to estimate the size of the allow–forbid asymmetry when measuring attitudes toward drug policy issues in the Norwegian adult population.

Methods: The data derive from a sample of 2182 adult Norwegian, aged 18–70, drawn from a large online panel comprising more than 50,000 Norwegian citizens (55% response rate). According to a 2 (allow vs. forbid) × 2 (question vs. statement) between-subjects design, participants indicated support for the following three restrictive drug policies: (i) to allow/forbid wine in grocery stores, (ii) to allow/forbid smoking in parks and other public places and (iii) to allow forbid cannabis for recreational purposes.

Results: There was not a significant difference between the framing conditions (forbid–allow) across the three policies, with an estimated difference of 2 percentage points (95% confidence intervals 0–5).

Conclusion: The results suggest that survey research in the present context of drug policy is indeed more of a fact-finding enterprise than a process of constructing data.

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Drug policies are often subject to public debate. In Norway, for instance, there have been public discussions of whether to extend the ban on smoking to an increasing number of public places, and whether grocery stores should sell wine. Recently, questions about decriminalizing or legalizing cannabis have also become a hot topic in many countries across the globe, including Norway. These issues are heavily debated in media as well as among lay people and they are definitely on the agenda of politicians. They are also political issues in the sense that they are subject to political decisions to be implemented, which in turn requires reasonable support from the general public.

Given that there is a complex interplay between public policy and public support (e.g., [Burstein, 2003](#)), it might be of considerable interest to know the level of public support for policy issues. Moreover, from a researcher's point of view, the study of people's attitudes gives valuable information about societal changes and political concerns of the public. However, it is well-known that responses to questions about societal issues not only depend on

the attitude of the respondents on the particular topic, but also on the wording of the question which is used to tap into the particular attitudinal issue (see [Schwarz, Groves, & Schuman, 1998](#), for review). If the wording influences people's responses, one might wonder whether it is possible to measure the "public opinion" on drug policies. In the present study we investigated the most well-known wording effect, the forbid/allow asymmetry, in the context of opinions regarding drug policies. We were able to find only two studies on the forbid/allow asymmetry in the drug area (smoking in public places) with quite different results (reported in [Holleman, 2000](#)).

The forbid/allow asymmetry was discovered by [Rugg \(1941\)](#). He found in a split-ballot experiment that the support for free speeches in the US was 21% percentage points higher when the respondents were asked "Do you think the US should *forbid* public speeches against democracy?" than when the verb *allow* was used instead of forbid although the two verbs would appear to be logically equivalent. The asymmetry was replicated in several studies by [Schuman and Presser \(1981\)](#) on the same issue. They noted in their review that this was the largest wording effect discovered, producing differences up to 30% percentage points. In a review of the asymmetry, [Holleman \(2000\)](#) noted that although there have been quite a lot of studies, the results were inconsistent: sometimes a large effect is found

* Corresponding author at: Norwegian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Research, PO Box 565, Sentrum, 0105 Oslo, Norway. Tel.: +47 93062779.
E-mail address: jr@sirus.no (J. Rise).

and sometimes none at all, also on quite similar issues, which creates difficulties in generalizing the asymmetry beyond the actual issue and communicative setting. Holleman (2000) performed a meta-analysis across a large number of issues and found that the asymmetry produced an average difference of 14 percentage points in favour of obtaining more “no, not forbid” than “yes, allow” answers (and correspondingly more “no, not allow” than “yes, forbid” answers).

Several explanations have been advanced to account for the asymmetry. The indifferent respondent hypothesis as proposed by Hippler and Schwarz (1986) suggested that the asymmetry is restricted to those with weak attitudes, but this finding was not upheld in other studies (Krosnick & Schuman, 1988; see Holleman, 2000, for a review). The connotations hypothesis advanced by Schuman and Presser (1981), states that although both “forbid” and “allow” have extreme connotations directing people into saying no to both questions, the former sounds harsher and more difficult to endorse. Holleman (2000) expanded on these explanations, arguing that the asymmetry could originate in the first part of the question–answering process (i.e. stage of attitude retrieval) or during the second stage (i.e. stage of attitude mapping). She provided evidence that the respondents activated similar attitudes on the two occasions, i.e. for both allow and forbid questions, and that the asymmetry could be attributed to slight changes in the perceived meaning of the response options due to the use of forbid/allow, i.e. when respondents map their opinion onto the response options.

The aim of the present study is to estimate how large the allow–forbid asymmetry is when measuring attitudes towards three drug policy issues in the Norwegian adult population: selling wine in grocery stores (which is not allowed), use of cannabis for recreational purposes (not allowed), and smoking tobacco in parks and other public places (allowed). We were able to find only two studies on the forbid/allow asymmetry in the drug area (smoking in public places) with quite different and inconsistent results (reported in Holleman, 2000). Based on previous literature, our prediction is that people should be less willing to forbid than not allow these practices, i.e. we should obtain more “forbid: No” than “allow: Yes” answers (and consequently less “forbid: Yes”, than “allow: No”). Based on the work by Hippler and Schwarz (1986), we additionally wanted to investigate whether the asymmetry varied with attitude strength.

The forbid/allow asymmetry is usually studied in terms of questions (e.g. “Should it be forbidden/allowed to...”), but people’s opinions on drug policies are can also be measured as level of agreement with statements such as “Alcohol advertising should be allowed” (Storvoll & Halkjelsvik, 2013). Thus, in addition to the difference between forbid and allow we extended previous research on wording effects by also including statements vs. questions as an experimental factor. We suspected that the forbid/allow asymmetry could be moderated by the format (statement vs. question), but held no directional hypothesis. We neither had any predefined hypothesis as to whether people should be more willing to agree with a restriction (“It should be forbidden...”) compared to saying yes to the corresponding question (“Should it be forbidden...?”).

Methods

A sample of 4000 individuals, aged 18–70, was drawn from an online panel comprising more than 50,000 Norwegian citizens. The sample was stratified according to figures from Statistics Norway, on gender, age (4 levels), geographic region (4 groups), and education (2 levels). Of the original sample, 2182 (55%) responded. We used the traditional split ballot design, in which a sample of respondents are randomly split into two or more subsamples, and each subsample gets a specific variant of the question. In this case two subsamples received allow/forbid questions, while the last

two subsamples received allow–forbid statements. The asymmetry for the three drug policy issues was measured using the stem “Should it be forbidden/allowed...” or “It should be forbidden/allowed...” followed by (i) to sell wine in grocery stores? (ii) to smoke tobacco in parks and other public places? (iii) to use cannabis for recreational purposes? Attitude strength was measured with the item “How strong are your opinions on this question?” with three response categories: weak, medium, and strong.

In sum, the design consisted of the following predictors: Framing (allow vs. forbid), which was the main study variable; Format (statement vs. question); Policy Issue (Wine, Tobacco, Cannabis); and Attitude Strength (Weak, Medium, Strong). The two former measures were manipulated experimentally between subjects, Policy Issue was measured within subjects, and Attitude Strength varied naturally between the respondents and the three policies. The dependent measure was whether one supported a restrictive policy (i.e., answering yes/agree when policy was framed as “forbid”, or no/disagree when framed as “allow”). We used a Generalized Linear Model (GENLIN procedure in SPSS with logit function) as an overall test across the three policies to explore main and interaction effects (95% confidence intervals in brackets).

Results

Table 1 presents the percentages supporting the three restrictive policies according to framing and format. The first data column shows the percentages answering yes/agree to the question/statement about forbidding something and the second shows the percentages answering no/disagree to the question/statement about allowing something. Neither of the differences between the two columns in Table 1 were statistically significant according to separate tests of differences of proportions for each of the policies, $p > .05$. The original data can be found in Table 2.

We first entered a model with the main effects Policy Issue (wine in stores, smoking in public places, use of cannabis), Format (statement vs. questions), and Framing (allow vs. forbid). There was not a significant difference between the framing conditions (forbid/allow), with an estimated difference of 2 [0,5] percentage points, Wald $\chi^2 = 2.21$, $p = .14$.

We did not predict a main effect of the format (question vs. statement), but there seemed to be slightly more support for restrictive policies when respondents indicated agreement/disagreement with statements compared to answering yes/no to questions, estimated difference = 3 [0,6] percentage points, Wald $\chi^2 = 4.72$, $p = .03$.

Although not central to our hypothesis, there were substantial differences in level of support between the three policy issues. Support for a ban on public tobacco smoking received the lowest level of support, with an estimate of 37% [35%, 39%] support; a higher level of support was given to forbidding/not allowing wine in grocery stores, estimated at 41% [39%, 43%], and highest level of

Table 1

The percentage distribution of “forbid” and “not allow” answers according to policy issue and format.

	Forbid	Not allow
Wine in stores:		
Question (N = 525/550)	38.3	43.1
Statement (N = 558/535)	40.1	43.9
Smoking ban:		
Question (N = 525/551)	33.1	36.5
Statement (N = 552/536)	39.1	37.5
Cannabis use:		
Question (N = 528/551)	84.5	83.1
Statement (N = 558/537)	86.2	87.7

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