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The Impact of Administration Modes on
Response Effects in Surveys

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The Impact of Administration Modes on Response Effects in Surveys

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The Impact of Administration Modes on Response Effects in Surveys

Many experiments have shown that the results of public opinion surveys can be significantly affected by the way in which questions are worded, the form in which they are presented, and the order or context in which they are asked. Nearly all of this evidence, however, has come from survey interviews conducted either face-to-face or by telephone, mostly from the latter. With only a few exceptions, none of the better-known response effects reported in the literature has been replicated in a self-administered or mail questionnaire. At a previous AAPOR meeting, we presented one of the first systematic comparisons of response effects in mail and telephone surveys (see Bishop, Hippler, Schwarz, & Strack, 1988, for a report). We have recently added a follow-up study to this line of work, and summarize some of the key findings in the present paper.

We begin with a short review of some of the major differences between self-administered and telephone interviews and their likely impact on the cognitive and communicative processes that underlie question answering. Subsequently, we focus on three particularly relevant response effects, namely (1) the emergence of question order and question context effects; (2) the emergence of response order effects; and (3) the impact of different numeric values of rating scales.

Modes of Data Collection and the Process of Question Answering

Chart 1 shows a summary of the key differences between face-to-face and telephone interviews as well as self-administered questionnaires, taken from Schwarz, Strack,

Hippler, & Bishop (1991).

Chart 1

Visual vs. Auditory Presentation of the Stimuli

One of the most obvious differences between the modes of administration is the sensory channel in which the material is presented. In self-administered questionnaires, the items are visually displayed to the respondent who has to read the material. In telephone interviews, as the other extreme, the items and the response alternatives are read to respondents who have to listen to what the interviewer says. In face-to-face interviews both modes of presentation may occur.

Sequential vs. Simultaneous Presentation of the Items

Closely related to the previous distinction is the temporal order in which the material is presented. Telephone and face-to-face interviews have a strict sequential organization. That is, respondents have to process the information in the temporal succession and the pace in which it is presented by the interviewer. They usually cannot go back and forth or spend relatively more or less time on some particular item. And even if respondents are allowed to return to previous items should they want to correct their responses, they rarely do so, in part because tracking one's previous responses presents a difficult memory task under telephone and face-to-face conditions. In contrast, keeping track of one's responses, and going back and forth between items, poses no difficulties under self-administered questionnaire conditions. Here, respondents can use as much time as they want to work on the questionnaire. Even if the questionnaire is

administered in a classroom setting, in which the available amount of time is limited, they can at least allocate the time provided to them to those questions that they want to think about more carefully. Moreover, a self-administered questionnaire allows respondents to go back to previous questions and to be reminded on their earlier answers. At the extreme, respondents may complete different parts of the questionnaire at different times. Accordingly, we may expect that self-administered questionnaires render the sequential organization of questions less influential.

Time Pressure

Time pressure is a psychologically relevant variable that has been shown to increase "top of the head" phenomena. Most importantly, time pressure interferes with extensive recall processes and increases reliance on the first thing that comes to mind. Moreover, it induces individuals to resort to heuristic processing strategies at the expense of detail-oriented piecemeal processing strategies. Accordingly, time pressure is likely to affect recall as well as judgmental processes.

The greatest time pressure can be expected under telephone interview conditions, where moments of silent reflection cannot be bridged by nonverbal communication that indicates that the respondent is still paying attention to the task. The least degree of time pressure is induced by self-administered questionnaires that allow respondents to work at their own pace. Face-to-face interviews create intermediate time pressure, due to the possibility of bridging pauses by nonverbal communication.

In addition, the administration modes differ in the extent to which they allow additional explanations, permit the perception of interviewer characteristics, offer confidentiality, and allow the control of external distractions.

Research Design

To explore the impact of these differences on a variety of response effects, we conducted a mode effects experiment with a systematic random sample of 414 adults (18 years or older). Respondents were selected from the telephone directories for Mannheim and Heidelberg, Germany, and the data were collected in November and December 1991.

Respondents were initially contacted on the phone and asked whether they are willing to participate in a survey. Half of those willing were immediately interviewed on the phone, resulting in $N = 229$ respondents in the telephone interview condition. The remaining respondents were informed that a questionnaire would be mailed to them. The mail survey followed Dillman's Total-Design-Method and achieved a response rate of 83%, resulting in $N = 183$ in the mail survey condition. Thus, the initial telephone screening procedure allowed us to avoid large differences in response rates, which would otherwise result in self-selection problems under mail survey conditions.

In addition, we controlled for a possible influence of the telephone screening procedure by running another mail survey condition in which respondents were not contacted on the phone. Under this condition, the response rate was a mere 55% ($N = 74$). However, comparisons of the mail survey data with and without telephone screening did not reveal any differences in the pattern of results for the questions we want to address today. Accordingly, we combined both mail survey conditions for the purposes of the present paper, bringing the number of mail respondents to a total of $N = 257$.

Question Order and Question Context

Turning to our substantive findings, let us first consider the emergence of question order effects. Most obviously, effects of the sheer order in which questions are asked require

sequential question presentation. Most question order effects should therefore be either reduced or absent under self-administered questionnaire conditions, depending on the proportion of respondents who read all or some of the questions before answering them, thus eliminating sequential presentation.

However, the absence of question order effects does not imply that the broader context of a question is generally unlikely to affect responses under self-administered conditions. Rather, it only implies that the impact of question context should be less dependent on the order in which the questions are asked.

To explore this possibility, we asked respondents how much money they would be willing to donate to support the suffering citizens of Russia. This question was either preceded or followed by two questions about taxes. The first asked whether respondents preferred a reduction in income tax or increased welfare spending, whereas the second question assessed their support for tax raises that were implemented during the preceding months.

Chart 2

As expected, introducing these context questions affected the amount of money that respondents' were willing to donate to Russia. Specifically, respondents who were interviewed on the telephone reported that they wanted to donate 45 marks if the Russia question was asked first, but only 29 marks if the Russia question was preceded by the tax questions. Thus, drawing attention to tax raises and to welfare spending in Germany decreased their willingness to donate to Russia.

However, respondents under mail conditions were not significantly influenced by

the order in which these question were asked. Rather, they reported lower average donations under both question order conditions. Moreover, their intended donations were as low as the intended donations offered under telephone conditions when the tax questions were asked first. In combination, this pattern indicates that responses to the donation question were influenced by the tax questions even under conditions were the tax questions followed the donation question.

In combination with some of our previous findings (see Schwarz et al., 1991), this illustrates that it is important to differentiate between question order and question context effects. Whereas the sequential nature of telephone and face-to-face interviews guarantees that responses can only be influenced by preceding questions, self-administered surveys allow for an influence of subsequent questions as well. As a result, we see no effect of sheer question order in the mail survey, but a pronounced effect of question context under either order condition. Hence, finding no order effects under self-administered conditions does not necessarily imply that substantively related questions did not affect the results.

Response Order Effects

Next, we turn to the emergence of response order effects under different administration modes. Obviously, the order in which response alternatives are presented to respondents has long been known to affect the obtained results. Theoretically, primacy effects, that is, higher endorsements of items presented early in the list, as well as recency effects, that is, higher endorsements of items presented late in the list, may be obtained. As previous research has shown (see Schwarz, Hippler, & Noelle-Neumann, 1992, in press), the direction of response order effects seems to depend on the items' serial position, their plausibility, and the administration mode used: If the response alternatives are presented

on show cards or in a self-administered questionnaire, items presented early in the list are more likely to be extensively processed than items presented later. This results in primacy effects, provided that the item is plausible to respondents. In contrast, if the items are read to respondents, the last response alternatives are more likely to be extensively processed and recalled than the first ones. This results in recency effects, again assuming plausibility of the items. Accordingly, our key hypothesis predicts the emergence of primacy effects under self-administered conditions and the emergence of recency effects under telephone interview conditions. However, all of our previous data came from archival sources and the mode of data collection was confounded with other differences between studies. Accordingly, a more controlled experimental test was called for.

To provide this test, we conducted a replication of Payne's (1951) "Oil Supply" question (also used by Schuman and Presser, 1981). The question read:

"Some people say that we will still have plenty of oil 25 years from now. Others say that at the rate we are using our oil, it will all be used up in about 15 years. Which of these ideas would you guess is most nearly right?"

The order in which the two opinions were presented was reversed for half of the sample.

Chart 3

As shown in the next Chart, Payne's original finding replicated well in the German sample, under telephone interview conditions. Specifically, pronounced recency effects of 15 percentage points were obtained for both response alternatives in this

auditory presentation format. However, this response order effect was eliminated under the visual presentation conditions of the mail survey.

Although the reversal of the recency effect obtained under telephone conditions was not strong enough to result in a primacy effect under mail conditions, these data are in line with the general assumption that the direction of response order effects depends on the administration mode used. Most importantly, this pattern, as well as our previous analyses of archival data, indicates that mail surveys or face-to-face interviews with the help of show cards may render results that are quite different from the results of telephone interviews without the use of show cards, given that the primacy effects that emerge in one mode combine with the recency effects that may emerge in the other.

The Impact of Different Numeric Values of Rating Scales

Finally, we turn to the use of rating scales under different administration modes. As we have shown recently (Schwarz, Knäuper, Hippler, Noelle-Neumann, & Clark, 1991; see also Schwarz & Hippler, 1991, for a more extended theoretical discussion), the numeric values provided as part of a rating scale may influence respondents' interpretation of the endpoint labels. For example, in one of our studies, a representative sample of German adults was asked to rate their success in life along an 11-point rating scale, with the endpoints labeled "not at all successful" and "extremely successful".

Chart 4

When the numeric values ranged from 0 ("not at all successful") to 10 ("extremely

successful"), 34 percent of the respondents endorsed values between 0 and 5. However, only 13 percent endorsed formally equivalent values between -5 and 0, when the scale ranged from -5 ("not at all successful") to +5 ("extremely successful"). Subsequent experiments indicated that this difference reflects differential interpretations of the term "not at all successful." When this label is combined with the numeric value 0, respondents interpret it to reflect the absence of success. However, when the same label is combined with the numeric value -5, they interpret it to reflect the presence of failure.

This differential interpretation of the same term as a function of its accompanying numeric value is also reflected in inferences that judges drawn on the basis of a report given along a rating scale. For example, in one of our experiments, a fictitious student reported his academic success along one of the above scales, checking either a -4 or a 2. As expected, judges who were asked to estimate, how often this student had failed an exam assumed that he failed twice as often when he checked a -4 than when he checked a 2, although both values are formally equivalent along 11-point rating scales of the type described above.

If these effects vary as a function of administration mode is an open question. On the one hand, respondents may be more likely to pay attention to the numerical values if they are shown on a show card or a questionnaire. On the other hand, respondents have to interpret the meaning of the endpoint labels under either mode and offering specific numeric values along with the label in a telephone interview may be sufficient. To explore this issue, we asked respondents to evaluate German politicians. In the telephone condition, this question read:

"Please imagine a thermometer that runs from minus five to plus five, with a zero

in between. Please use this thermometer to tell us how you feel about some politicians. Plus five means that you think very highly of them, and minus five means that you think very little of them. How do you feel about..."

For half of the respondents, this scale ran from zero to ten, rather than from minus five to plus five.

Chart 5

As expected, respondents endorsed values that implied a more favorable opinion along the minus five to plus five, than along the zero to ten scale. Specifically, we obtained mean differences of up to 1.3 scale points on these eleven-point scales. However, the impact of numeric values was virtually unaffected by the administration mode used, as a comparison of both panels indicates.

How powerful these effects are, becomes particularly apparent when we examine the percentage of respondents who chose a value below the respective mid-point of the scale. In this case, we obtain approval differences of up to 36 percentage points, as shown in the next chart, which shows the same data pooled over both modes.

Chart 6

Conclusions

In combination, the data reviewed in the present paper indicate that the mode of data collection may strongly influence the obtained results. With regard to question order

effects, our present findings replicated our previous observation that a self-administered mode may eliminate the influence of sheer question order, but not the influence of question context in a broader sense. Rather, in a self-administered mode responses may be influenced by subsequent questions as well. With regard to response order effects, we previously suggested on the basis of archival data that the emergence of primacy and recency effects is also mode dependent. Specifically, an auditory presentation format seems to foster the emergence of recency effects, whereas a visual presentation format seems to foster the emergence of primacy effects. Our current experimental findings provide some qualified support for this conclusion. As expected, we obtained a recency effect under telephone conditions, which was eliminated under mail conditions -- although the predicted reversal to a primacy effect was not obtained. Finally, we observed very reliable effects of the numeric values offered as part of a rating scale, which were independent of the administration mode used.

Whereas there is much that remains to be learned about the impact of administration mode, we are happy to note that the key findings predicted by our theoretical analyses (see Schwarz, Strack, Hippler, & Bishop, 1991) replicate across studies.

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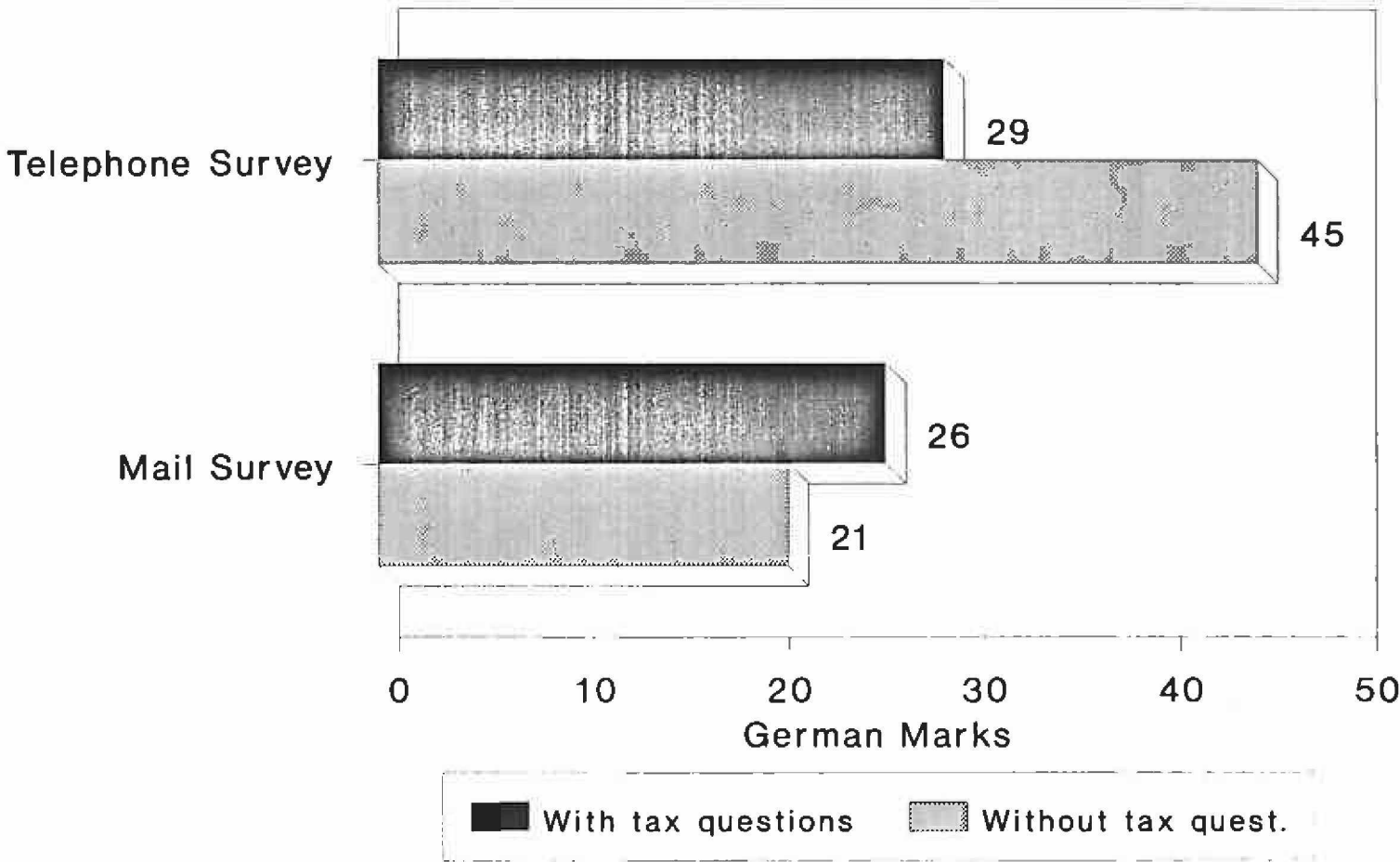
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Comparison of Psychological Aspects of Mode of Survey Data Collection

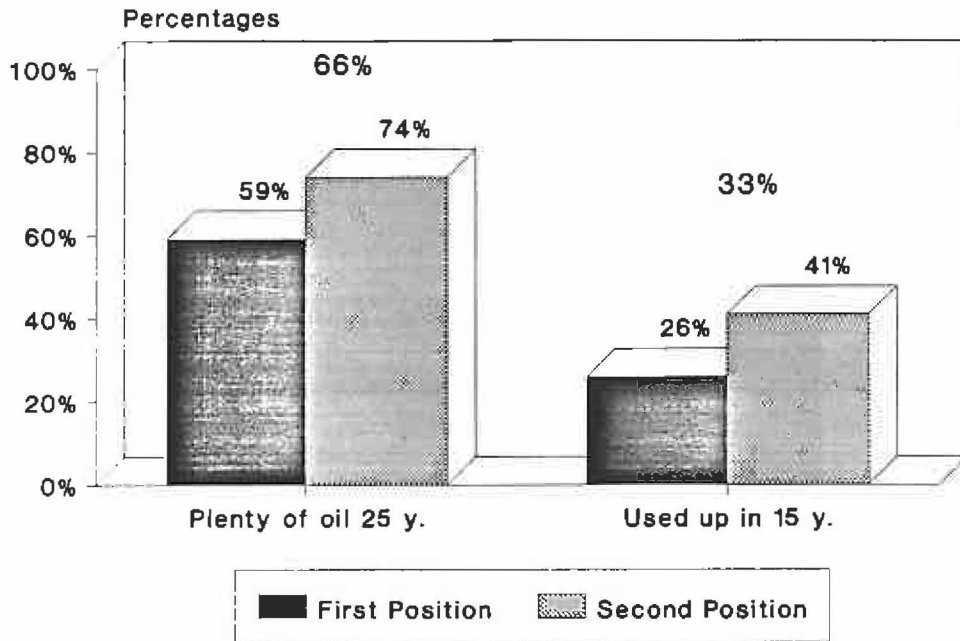
Variable	Face-to-Face Interview	Telephone Interview	Self-Administered Questionnaire
Visual (V) vs. auditory (A) presentation	A/V	A	V
Sequential (SE) vs. simultaneous (SI) presentation	SE	SE	SI
Time pressure (+/-)	+	++	0
Additional explanations from interviewer (+/-)	++	+	0
Perception of interviewer characteristics (+/-)	++	+	0
Perceived confidentiality (+/-)	--	-	+/?
External distractions	?	?	?

Ref.: Schwarz, N., Strack, F., Hippler, H.J., & Bishop, G. (1991): The Impact of Administration Mode on Response Effects in Survey Measurement. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 5, 193-212.

Donating Money for Russia With or without Context Information



"Oil Supply Question" in Telephone Survey



"Oil Supply Question" in Mail Survey

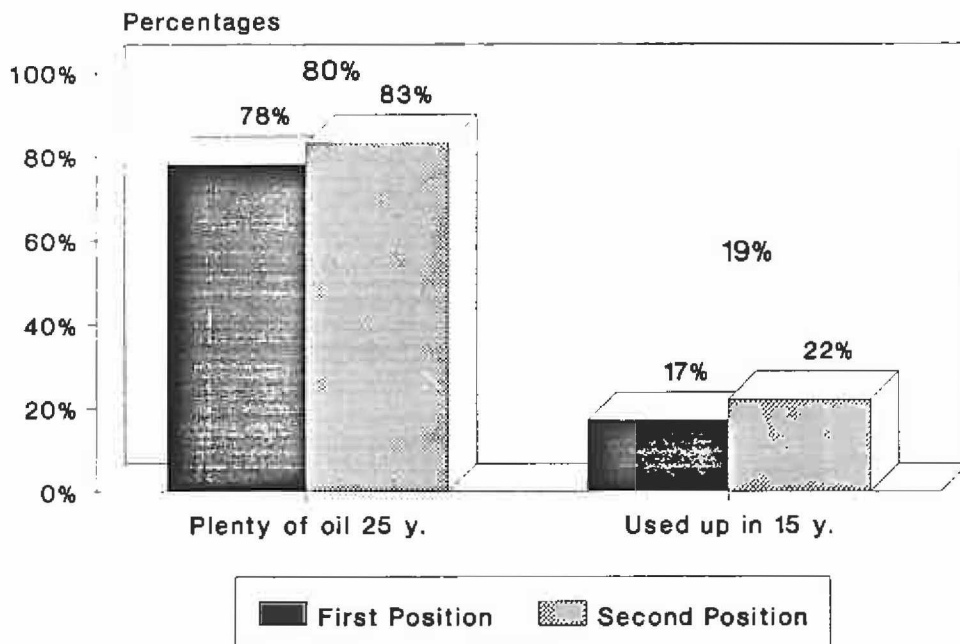
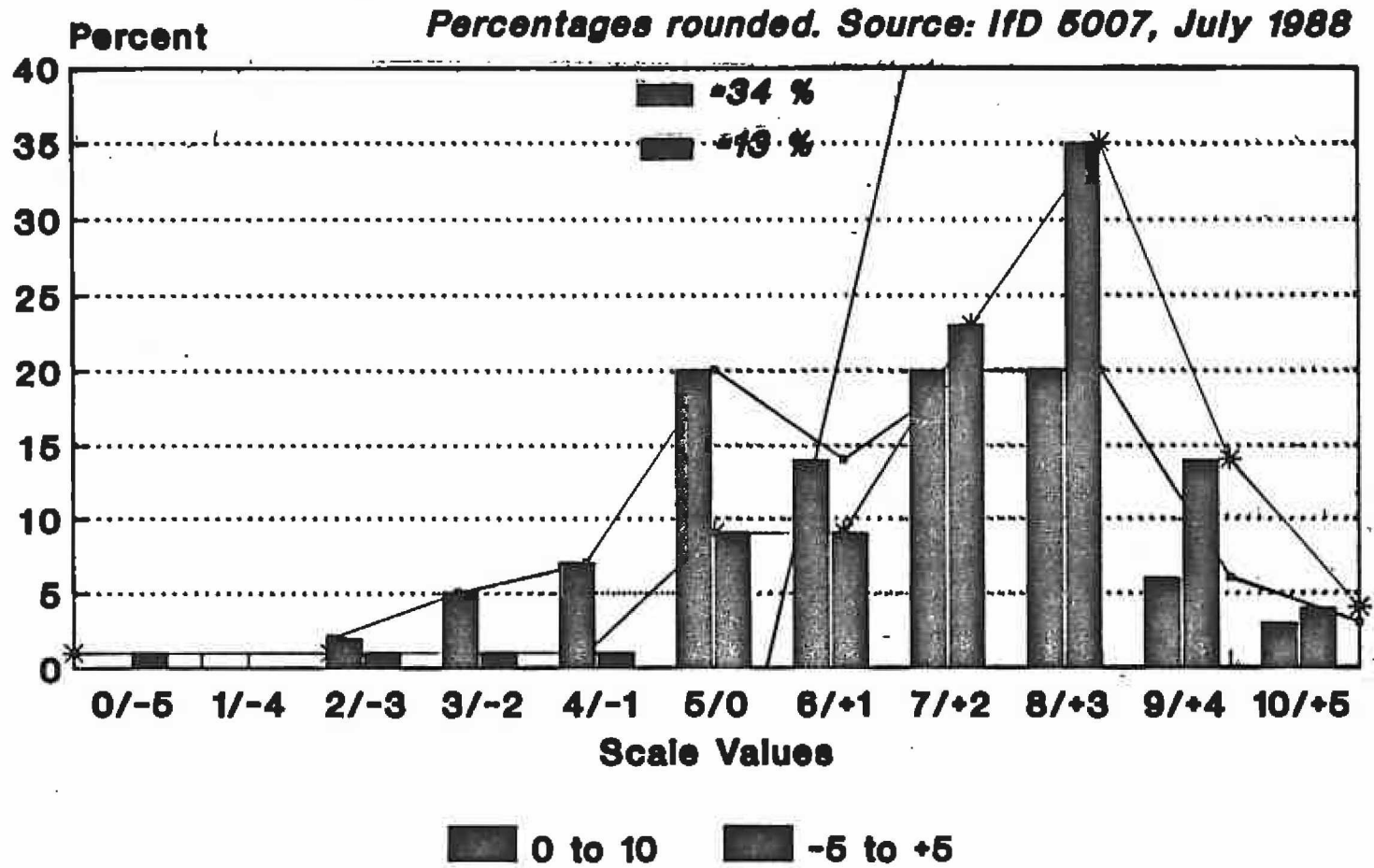
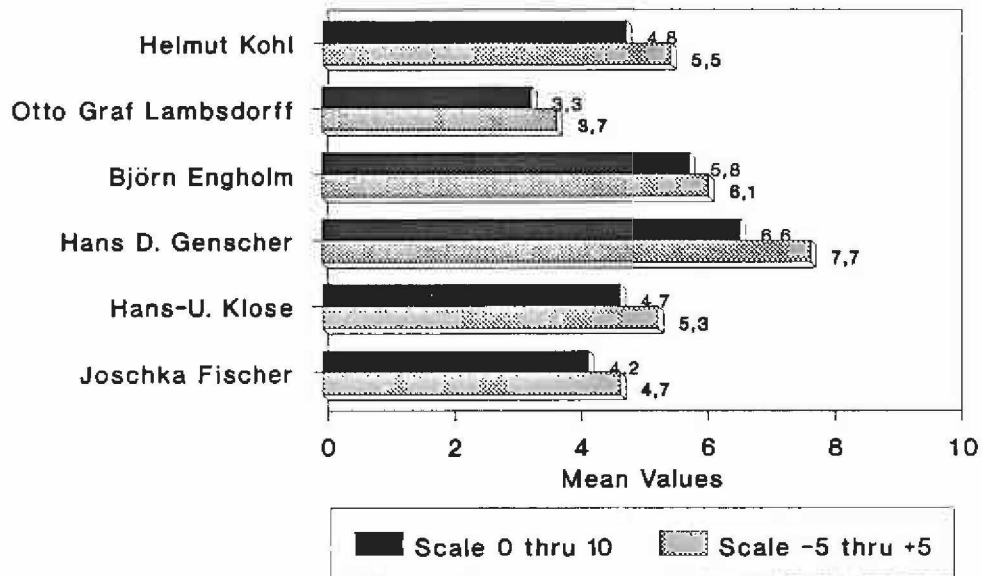


Figure 1: The Impact of Numeric Scale Values on Reports Along Rating-Scales



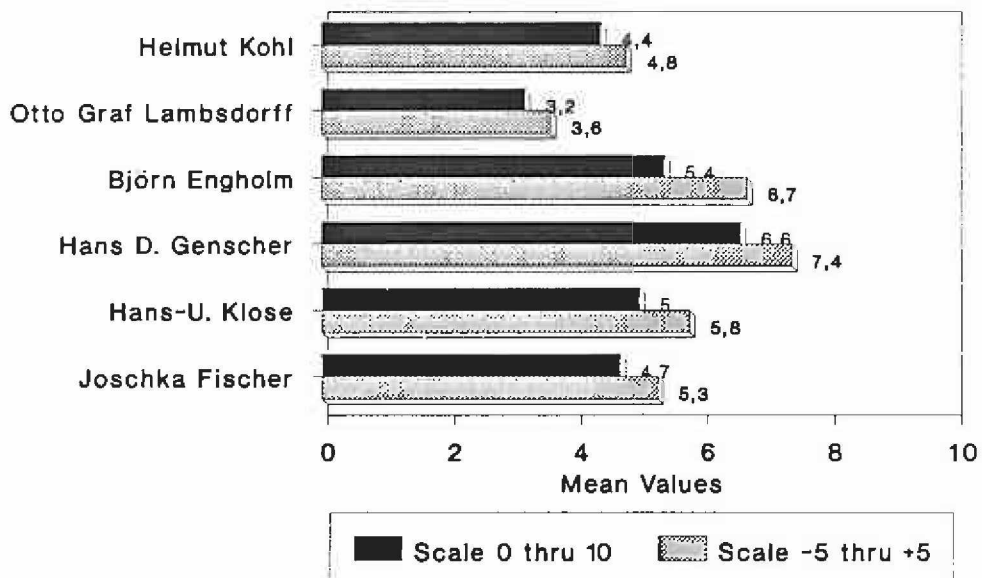
Chi2(10) = 105.1, p<.0001

Mean Ratings of German Politicians - Mail Survey -



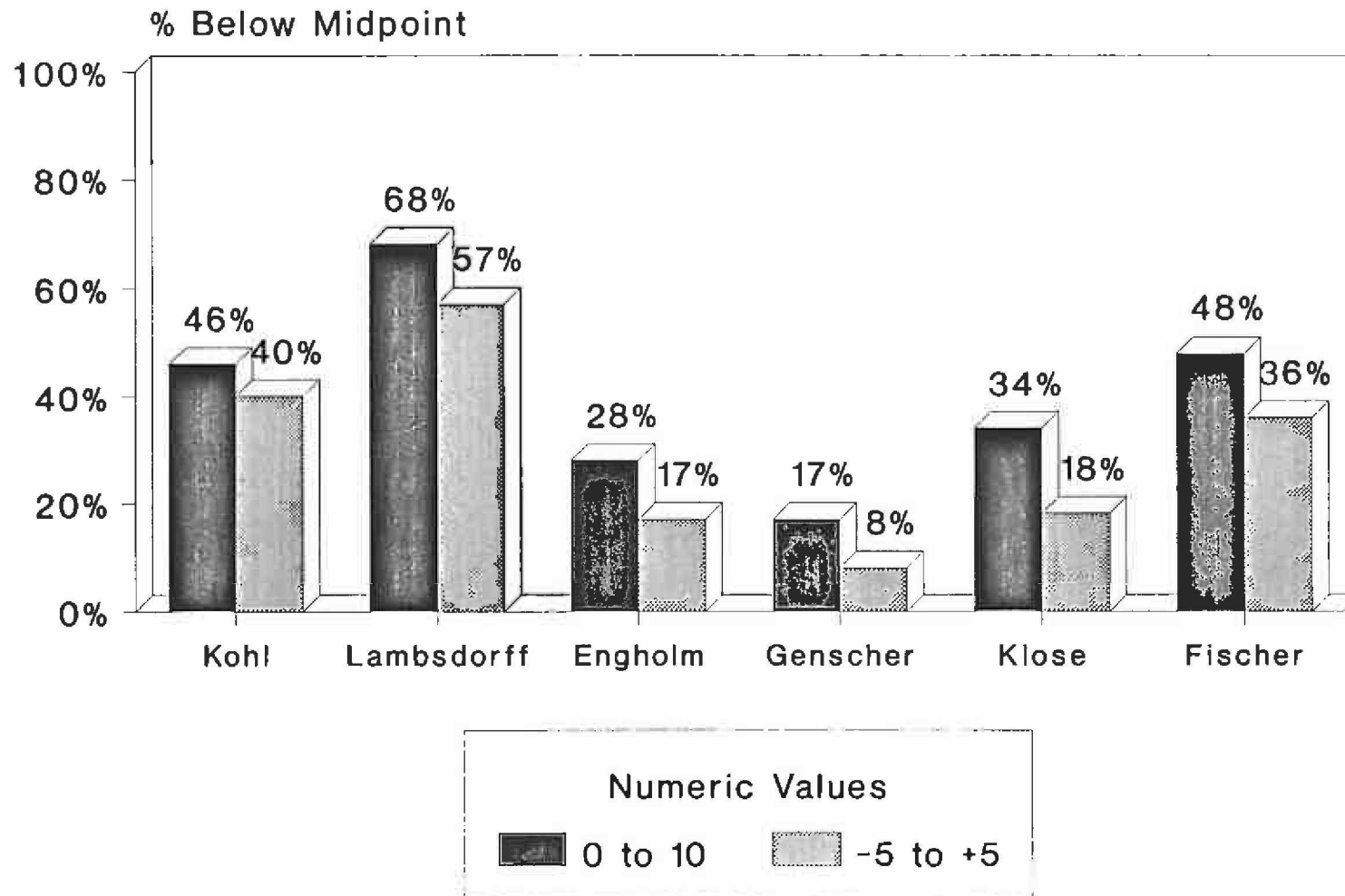
0/-5 think little of him
10/+5 think highly of him

Mean Ratings of German Politicians - Telephone Survey -



0/-5 think little of him
10/+5 think highly of him

Rating Scales: The Impact of Numeric Values



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