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How well do opinion surveys measure racism?

Knowing public attitudes towards immigrants and immigration is essential for European Union countries, faced with a sizeable number of immigrants on the one hand, and, on the other, with the electoral success of anti-immigrant political parties such as the Front national (FN) in France, the Vlaams Blok in Belgium, the FPÖ in Austria and the Lega Nord in Italy. And innumerable surveys have been carried out to determine the level of racism and xenophobia in Europe. But are opinion surveys the best way to measure racism? Do people speak freely about such a topic in democratic societies where anti-racism is the norm? What about social desirability effects, especially among educated respondents aware of the ‘politically correct’ answers? These are the questions that the two following papers try to answer, using different types of measures and focusing on the methodological aspect of the study of racism.

The first paper, by myself and Guy Michelat, is based on the latest survey on racism and xenophobia in France (2000), conducted annually since 1990 for the Commission nationale consultative des droits de l’homme (CNCDH). We compare a subjective measure of racism—individuals’ personal feelings about how racist they are—and an objective measure—scores on a survey tapping for negative opinions about immigrants and foreigners. Because of the many possible meanings the word can have, an open question assesses what it means to be ‘racist’ for the respondents. The results show, first, that a sizeable proportion of French adults describe themselves as ‘racist’. In spite of the moral censure attached to such an attitude, up to 43 per cent of the sample readily admits to being ‘rather’ or ‘a little’ racist, a number that doubles among FN voters and supporters. The answers to the open question clearly show that the dividing line runs between those who choose one of these two answers and those who feel ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ racist. If the open question shows a general agreement about a definition of racism—refusing, rejecting, not liking foreigners and people seen as ‘different’—the former group tends to justify such an attitude by blaming the immigrants and foreigners, while the latter condemns racism and supports its victims.

The second finding is that subjective and objective racism match each other closely, and that respondents are consistent. The more racist they feel they are, the more likely they are to endorse negative statements about immi-

grants and minorities and thus score high on the objective racism scale, and *vice versa*. If one combines the subjective and objective measures, one finds, at one end, the blatant *racists* (32 per cent), who claim to be and are racist, and, at the other end, the *anti-racists* (41 per cent), who do not feel and are not racist. Together, these two groups amount to practically three-quarters of the sample.

However, minor but interesting discrepancies appear with regard to the one-quarter that falls between the two groups. The *deniers* (14 per cent) dispute being personally racist, in spite of moderately high scores on the objective scale. In line with theories of *subtle* or *covert* racism,¹ members of this group are aware of an anti-racist norm and do not see themselves as ‘racist’, or at least do not want to seem to the interviewer to be racist. But they tend to blame immigrants for racism—accusing them of not making an effort to adapt to the French way of life and values—and to give ostensibly non-racist justifications for what can be seen as racist attitudes. Conversely, 10 per cent of the sample, those we call the *scrupulous*, feel themselves to be racist although they have low scores on the objective racism scale. One finds this type among principled respondents—Catholics who still go to church every Sunday, on the one hand, and dedicated Communists on the other—as if their religious or political convictions entail stricter standards of self-evaluation. The combining of objective and subjective measures thus offers a more complex picture of racism in France today.

The second paper, by Louk Hagendoorn and Paul Sniderman, presents the results of a Dutch survey on prejudice conducted in 1998. Many of the questions asked—about the perception of minorities, their rights, their ability to adapt to the Dutch way of life—are similar to those asked in the French survey. But the authors invite us to look at the problem of prejudice from a different angle. Are negative opinions about immigrants necessarily prejudiced? Shouldn’t one first, as Emory Bogardus suggested a long time ago, compare *stereotypes* (characteristics attributed to a group) with *sociotypes* (actual characteristics)? To disentangle what is and what is not prejudice, in the sense of a systematic consistent bias against all groups, they carry out a number of experiments inspired by Paul Sniderman’s earlier approach to measuring prejudice in the United States and Italy.² Taking advantage of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), they randomly manipulate the framing and the context of the questions according to the factors supposed to influence respondents’ answers. To see if some minorities are more disliked than others, they vary the target group. To determine whether immigrants are rejected *per se* or because of their socio-economic or cultural characteristics,

1 See, for instance, T. F. Pettigrew and R. W. Meertens, ‘Subtle and blatant prejudice in Western Europe’, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 25, 1995, 57–75.

2 P. Sniderman and T. Piazza, *The Scar of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1993) and P. Sniderman, P. Peri, R. De Figueiredo and T. Piazza, *The Outsider: Prejudice and Politics in Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2000).

they test reactions to imaginary ‘new migrants’, based on whether they have a high or low level of education and speak Dutch fluently. And, to make the conditions in which opinions are formed as much like everyday life as possible, they test out whether providing respondents with arguments and counter-arguments—the interviewer might mention the support of scientific or political authorities or offer a friendly comment—can make them change their mind on a given issue.

The most striking result is the variability of expressed prejudice. If, for instance, the interviewer acts supportive, the proportion of respondents who agree that immigrants cause ‘many more social problems than is usually thought’ will rise by 5 percentage points, and the proportion who agree that immigrants cause ‘many fewer’ social problems increases by 10 percentage points. The results are even more spectacular if one challenges the interviewees’ views. In an experiment concerning affirmative action at school, between 20 and 50 per cent will change their mind according to the type of argument used. The next step, of course, which the authors do not develop here, is to understand who can be swayed, and why.

Hagendoorn and Sniderman’s second conclusion is that one can hold negative views of immigrants without necessarily being prejudiced. A scale of prejudice that measures the tendency to attribute negative stereotypes to out-groups finds a hardcore of some 25 per cent of the sample who have high scores and are systematically hostile to immigrants and foreigners, whatever the group and whatever the question. But respondents with low scores on the same scale share some of these negative views: they oppose the admission of new immigrants, they find them unsuited to the host culture and they avoid social contacts with them. Are these respondents devoid of prejudice, and only reacting to the characteristics of the immigrants themselves, as stated by the authors? Or are they *subtle* racists, aware of the anti-racist norm, who only reject minorities on ostensibly non-racist grounds? The debate is ongoing. In any case, these experiments break new ground in the study of opinion-making and make a strong case for the refashioning of survey questionnaires, especially on such a sensitive topic as racism.³

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3 On recent trends in experiment-driven opinion surveys, see P. Sniderman, ‘The new look in public opinion research’, in A. W. Finifter (ed.), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II* (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association 1993), 219–45.