

**Be Specific!**  
**How Item Specificity Can Influence  
Political Interest Trends**

Ray Block Jr.  
[rblock@fsu.edu](mailto:rblock@fsu.edu)

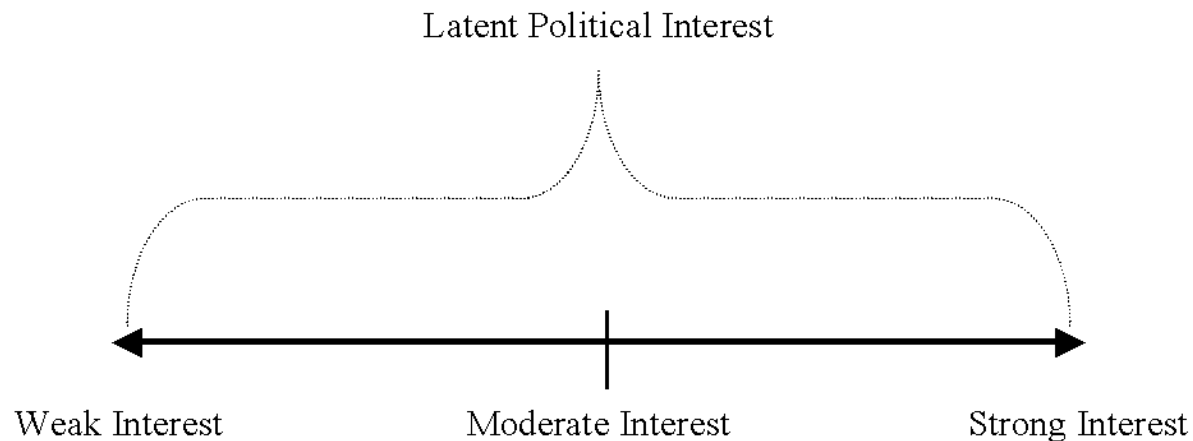
Betsy Jane Becker  
[bjbecker@mail.coe.fsu.edu](mailto:bjbecker@mail.coe.fsu.edu)

# Defining Political Interest

---

What is it?

- Interest = Curiosity about/attention to politics
  - How closely citizens “follow” politics
  - Bennett’s (1986) “interest continuum”



# Measuring Political Interest

## Dissecting survey items (an example)

Question ID	Title of poll
November 20, 2004-January 6, 2005	
VCF0013: Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. <del>Would you</del> going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?	
Response Distributions	Response labels
20 7	most of the time some of the time Only now and then Hardly at all
Source: 2004 American National Election Study	
Methodology: Based on telephone interviews with a national adult sample of 1,541.	
Data provided by The Inter-University Consortium of Political and Social Science (ICPSR), University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA.	
Archive	

# Motivation Behind Research

---

So what?! (why political interest is “interesting”)

- Essential feature of normative democratic theory:
  - For the ancient Greeks, “idiocy” refers to political apathy rather than mental deficiency
- Key variable in empirical political research:
  - One of the strongest predictors of political participation
- Yet, we know relatively little about it:
  - *“...it is perplexing that political scientists have not shown more recent interest, as it were, in political interest...”* (Macedo et al., 2005)

# Motivation Behind Research

---

## [Controversial] research questions and expectations

- Interest trends:
  - Are levels of political interest rising or declining over time?
    - *Expectation:* interest levels are declining
- Item specificity:
  - Do “specific” items yield lower levels of political interest than “non-specific” items?
    - *Expectation:* non-specific items yield inflated responses

# Outcome indices

---

Two outcome indices were considered:

- $p_{\text{strong}}$ : the proportion of respondents expressing strong interest (choosing the most positive response category),

and

- $p_{\text{any}}$ : the proportion of respondents expressing any interest (choosing any but the least positive response category).

Each index was a sample proportion  $p_i$ , with variance  $v_i = p_i(1-p_i)/n_i$ . The two indices overlapped, as the count of the most positive responses was also a part of the count of the “any interest” responses.

# Analyses

---

Analyses used a mixed-model approach, with between-sample variation incorporated into all analyses.

Tests of homogeneity were conducted following Hedges and Olkin (1984), and all indicated significant between-sample variation remained, even after model fitting.

We began by examining trends in responses over time, and for items with three response categories we also examined the impact of the specificity of the item prompt on the outcome.

High proportions of subjects expressed “any interest”, with means of 88% for 4-category items and 73% for 3-response items.

Both sets of proportions were significantly heterogeneous.

4 category

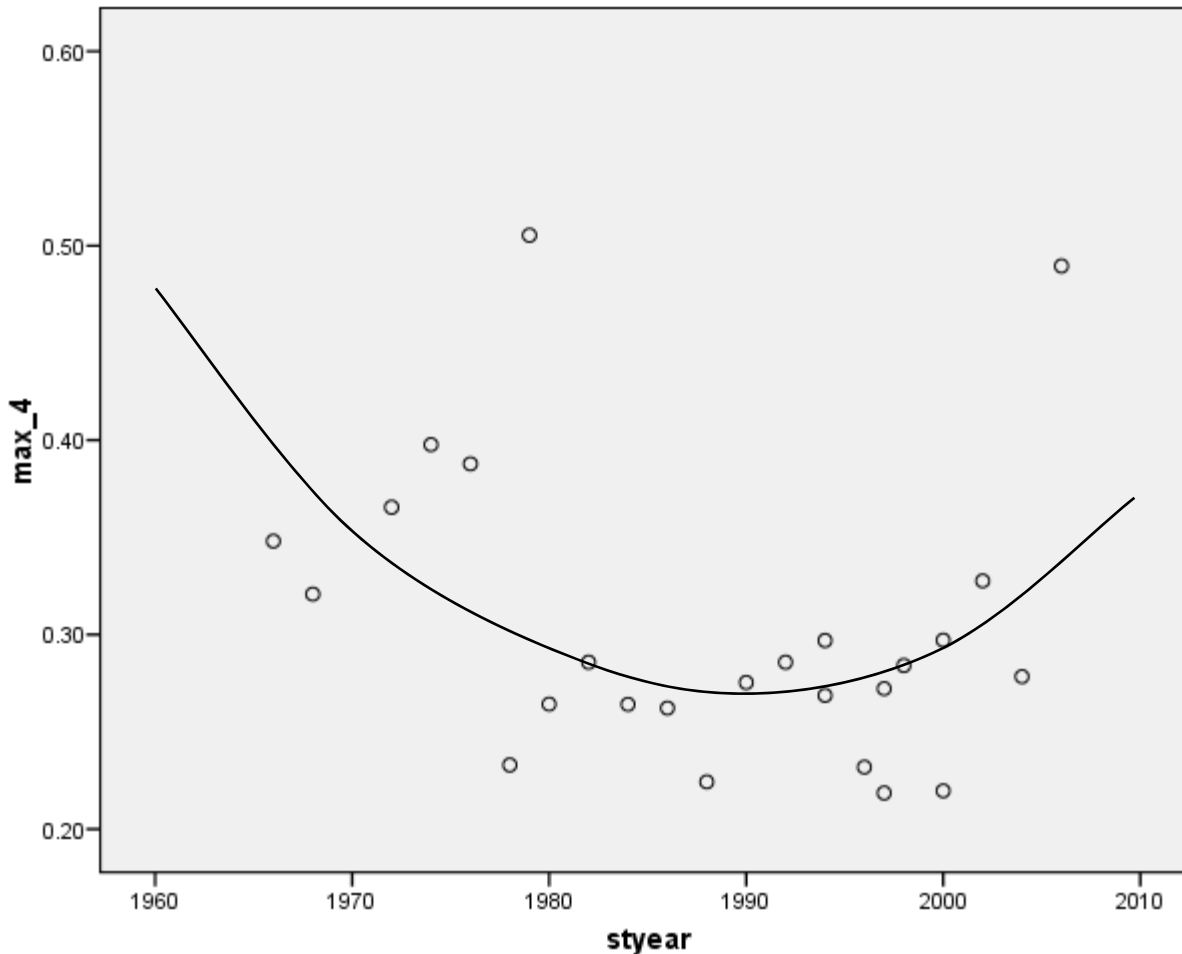
3 category

Proportions expressing strong interest for 3- and 4-category items varied significantly, with a mean of 30% of participants expressing strong interest for each type of item.

Between 22% and 51% showed strong interest on 4-category items, versus 14% to 52% on 3-category responses.

# Proportion with strong interest (4 category items) over time

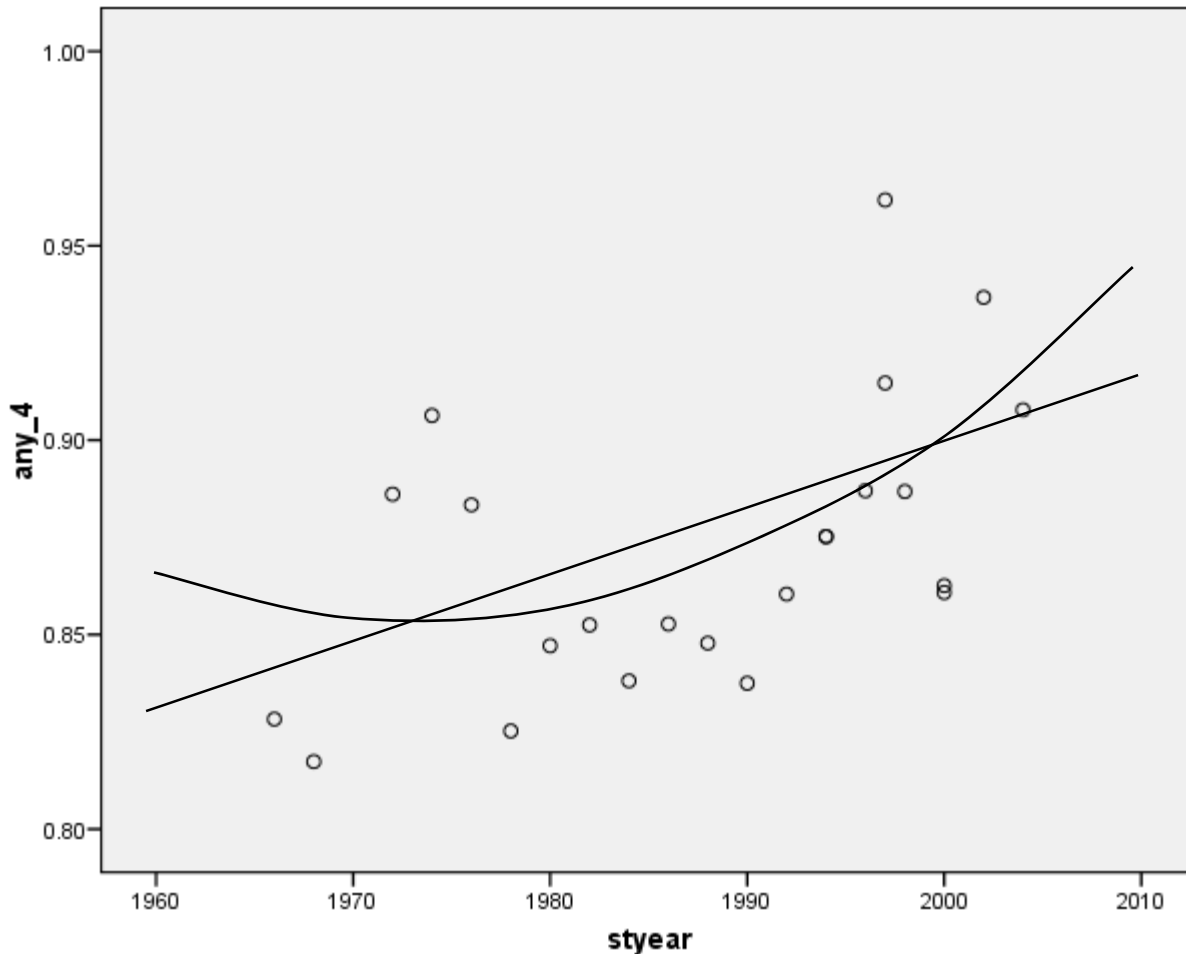
---



Strong responses show a significant quadratic trend, with a low point at about 1990.

Two unusually high proportions do not fit well with the trend, but omitting them does not change the curve much.

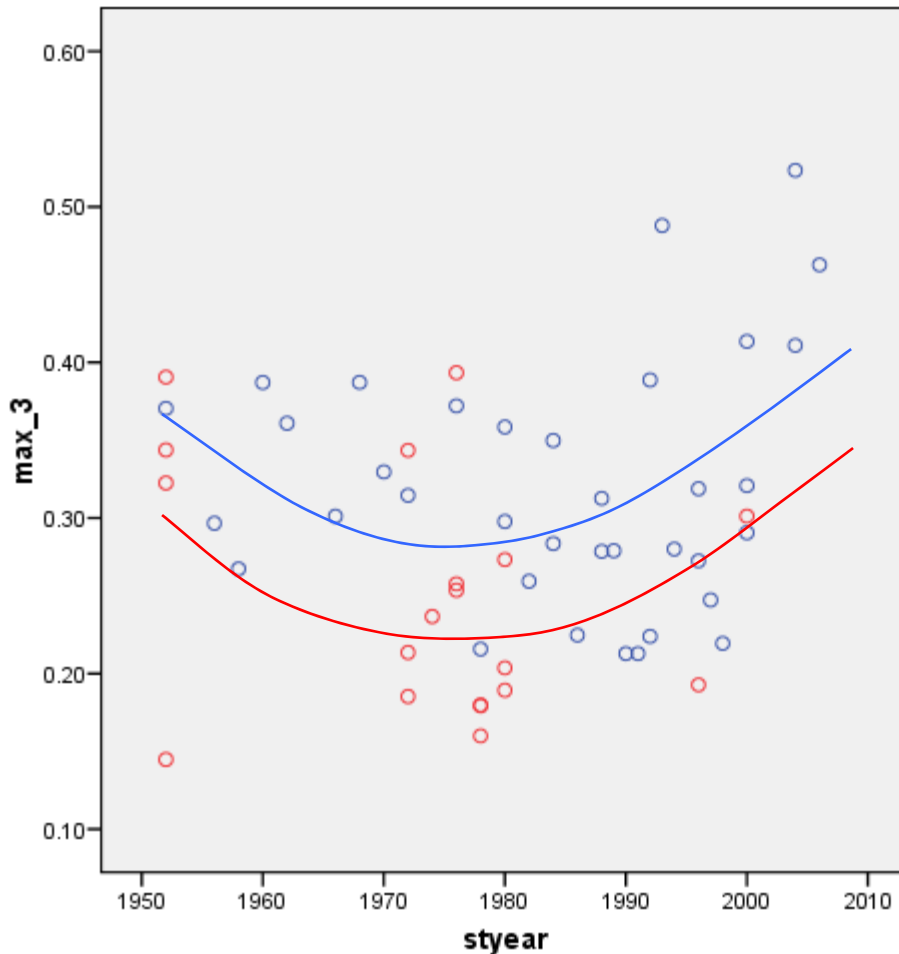
# Proportion with any interest (4 category items) over time



Responses show a significant quadratic trend, with a low point in the late 1980s.

Fitting only a linear trend also provides a significant model, but one that does not fit as well as the quadratic.

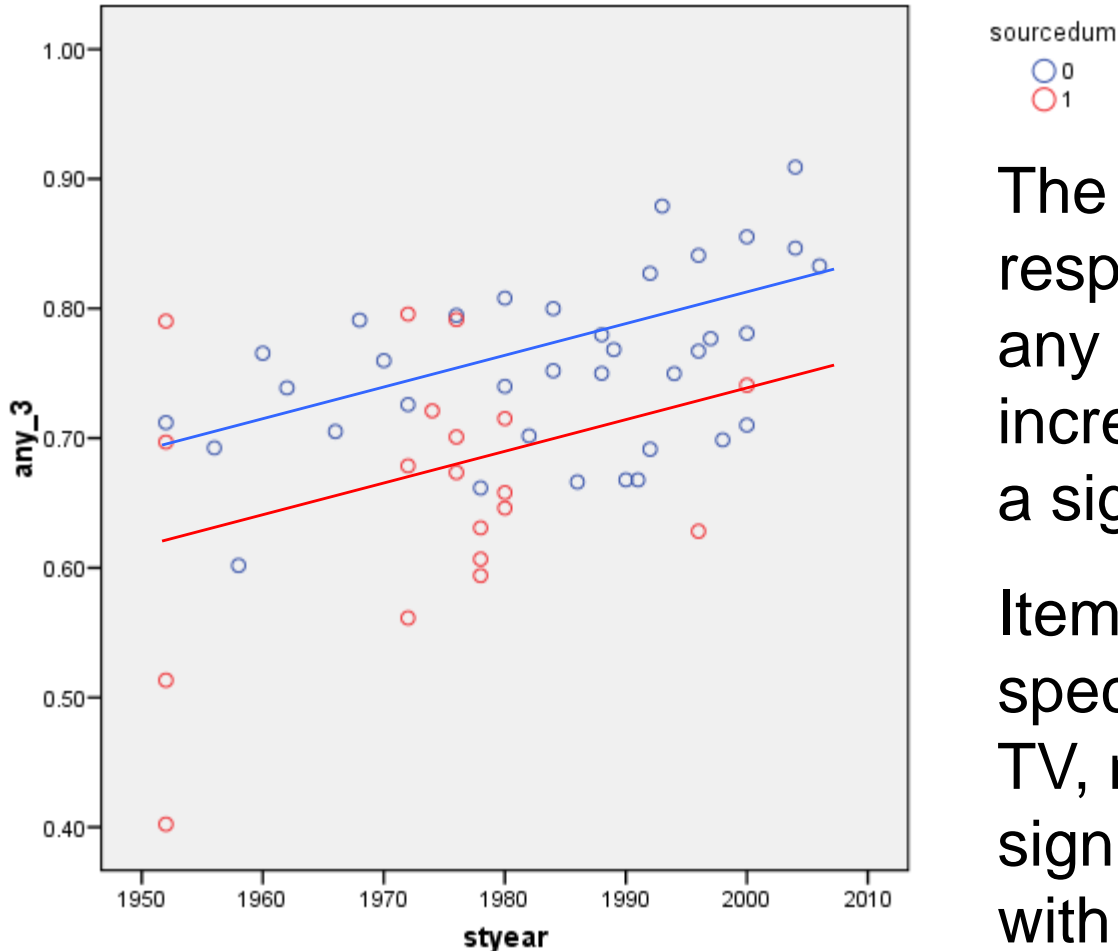
# Proportion with strong interest (3 category items) over time



Items asking about specific sources (●: radio, TV, magazines) elicited significantly less interest, by about 6%.

Both item types showed a quadratic trend in interest, with a low point at about 1980. The trends do not differ by item type.

# Proportion with any interest (3 category items) over time



The proportion of respondents expressing any interest in politics has increased over time, with a significant linear trend.

Items asking about specific sources (●: radio, TV, magazines) elicited significantly less interest, with about 7% fewer responding.

Notes beyond this point

# Measuring Political Interest

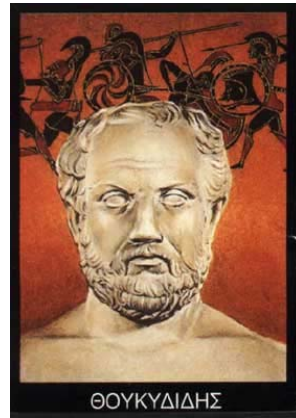
---

## Common American National Election Studies (ANES) items

- Interest in current election:
  - Some people don't pay much attention to campaigns. How about you? Would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in political campaigns (so far) this year?
- General interest in public affairs:
  - Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?

# Political Interest is “Interesting”

It plays a prominent role in democratic theory



“...we do not say that [the Athenian] who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.” (Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner. Intro. M. I. Finley. New York, NY: Penguin Books (1972, 147).