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The Perceived Threat of Nuclear War, Salience, and Open Questions

HOWARD SCHUMAN, JACOB LUDWIG, AND
JON A. KROSNICK

FREEMAN DYSON begins his book *Weapons and Hope* (1984) with the statement: "I want to discuss the gravest problem facing mankind, the problem of nuclear weapons" Dyson's belief that the threat of nuclear war constitutes the most important problem facing Americans today has been shared by leading scientists from Albert Einstein to the 20 eminent signatories of a recent article on the consequences of a "nuclear winter" (Ehrlich et al. 1983), and has been echoed as well by a number of political and intellectual leaders. Their reasoning is straightforward: the United States and the Soviet Union have for many

Abstract The most serious problem facing the United States, according to many scientific and political leaders, is the threat of nuclear war. Yet the standard survey question on the most important problem facing the country has often shown little public concurrence with this assumption. Our article uses experimentation in national samples to test whether this difference can be traced to limitations in either the form or the wording of the standard question. The results indicate that there are some important systematic differences between open and closed versions of the question, and also differences that result from reference to the nation as distinct from the world, but neither type of difference accounts for the infrequent mention of nuclear war on the standard question. Instead, other evidence indicates that most Americans believe that nuclear war is not going to happen at all, or that if it does happen it will be too far in the distant future to be of pressing concern to them personally.

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years and with ever-increasing certainty possessed sufficient nuclear weapons to destroy much of human civilization and perhaps extinguish the human race itself. In the face of such potential disaster, national issues, interests, and ideologies must be subordinated to the simple need for survival.

However, if we are to judge by surveys that allow spontaneous ranking of this issue relative to other issues, a strong concern about nuclear war has seldom been uppermost in the minds of the great majority of Americans. Surveys conducted during 1980 and 1981 by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center (Miller, 1981) and by the Gallup organization (Gallup, 1982) found fewer than 10 percent of the American adult population mentioning the threat of war of any kind when asked one or another variant of the basic question: "What do you think is the *most* important problem facing this country today?" During the 1950s and 1960s international issues did figure more prominently in answers to this standard index question, but for the most part these seemed to revolve around particular crises such as Vietnam, rather than around the more general issue of nuclear war (Smith, 1980). The two themes—nuclear war and more specific military engagements—are not easily separated, as we will later see, but the virtual disappearance of international categories from the Gallup results after the United States withdrew from Vietnam in the early 1970s shows how little the nuclear war threat itself was the enduring and overriding issue elicited by the most important problem question.

In this article we investigate two possible explanations for the relatively low spontaneous mention of the threat of nuclear war by Americans. One explanation implies methodological artifact: the standard open-ended most important problem question may itself be too limited, obtaining superficial answers that reflect what is momentarily salient to respondents about national events, rather than eliciting their more considered judgments. A finding by Schuman and Presser (1981) that a sudden cold spell in 1977 drastically affected responses to the most important problem question can be interpreted in just this way. The second explanation is quite opposite, however, for it accepts the survey data at face value and attempts to determine why the threat of nuclear war may not be regarded as especially important by most Americans, no matter how the question is asked.

We tested the two explanations by means of experimental comparisons of open and closed question forms at five time points over a 21-month period in 1982 and 1983, by follow-up probe questioning at two of the time points, by altering the wording and therefore the frame of reference of the questions, and by a review of some key indicators of the news environment for the same 18-month period. The article also

explores more generally the possible distinction between *salience* and *importance* in survey questioning. In doing so, we add to ideas and evidence developed earlier by Schuman and Presser (1981) concerning the differences between open and closed questions in survey research.

Salience and Importance in the Study of Attitudes

The standard “most important problem” (hereafter, MIP) question that is used by many survey organizations to track changes in public perceptions of national issues requires a spontaneous reply on the part of the person answering, rather than a choice among offered alternatives. It is useful to think of the respondent’s mental process in answering the question as a two-step sequence: a set of one or more issues must be brought to mind, then a choice made among them if there is more than one.

In the context of the survey interview, the first step in the process might seem to depend heavily on what is salient in the respondent’s immediate environment, for example, what he or she heard most recently on television news, saw on a newspaper’s front page, or experienced personally on the job, shopping in a store, or in some other recent life activity. It may be that inflation, unemployment, and other non-nuclear issues are frequently spotlighted in just these ways, but that the threat of nuclear war comes to mind less easily because much of the time it is not in the news a great deal—at least not in a concrete, easily visualized way—nor is it connected directly to daily life.¹

This line of explanation is consistent with the dominant use of the term *salience* in cognitive psychology, where it is ordinarily employed to refer to conspicuous but not necessarily important aspects of the external world (for example, an odd hat) that catch a perceiver’s immediate attention. Even where the internal world of memory is the reference, the stress is still on the fleeting, so that the phrase “seemingly trivial but highly salient information” (Taylor and Fiske, 1978:252) captures well the emphasis in much cognitive writing.

To be sure, salience has come to suggest matters of greater substance within survey research. Cannell and Kahn (1968) describe reporting accuracy as having “to do with the importance or salience of [an] event for the person reporting,” thus using the two terms interchangeably. And Scott (1968), dealing with the kinds of attitude questions frequently used in surveys, suggests that salience is “perhaps

¹ The effect of the mass media in influencing the definition of important issues for the public has been documented in a number of studies of agenda setting. See, for example, Iyengar et al. (1982), MacKuen (1981), McCombs (1981).

indistinguishable from . . . the importance of the focal object to the person." Yet it may be that open survey questions, even questions that ask for the "most important problem," obtain mainly what is salient in the sense of conspicuousness, not what is deeply important to the individual.

A closed question, on the other hand, by first offering a set of choices and then asking for a decision as to the most important, avoids the problem of differential salience among the issues presented. The respondent's sole task is to choose among the offered alternatives on the basis of considered judgment as to their relative importance.² If the reason that the threat of nuclear war is seldom given to the open MIP question is its lack of salience, then when added as a choice to a closed set of alternatives that are already given frequently to the open question, nuclear war should show a significantly larger (ideally, much larger) open-to-closed increment than the others.

We will first test this hypothesis directly, then consider the alternative line of explanation that takes seriously the apparent lack of public concern about nuclear war implied by responses to the open form of the MIP question.

Method and Preliminary Results

Open and closed forms of the MIP question were administered in split-ballot experiments to random halves of national samples in each of five monthly Survey Research Center (Survey of Consumer Attitudes) telephone surveys between April 1982 and December 1983. The exact wording of the questions and the coding categories used for the open form (and where relevant for the closed form) are presented in Table 1. The closed alternatives were developed in early 1982 by drawing on the largest categories reported for recently employed versions of the open question by the Gallup organization, with the restriction that no more than five closed alternatives could be used because prior experience suggested this to be the maximum number feasible in telephone surveys. In fact, after starting *a priori* with "the threat of nuclear war," only three other problems ("the high cost of living," "un-

² It might seem as though the order in which closed alternatives are read could influence responses, but Schuman and Presser (1981: 61–63) provide experimental evidence against this possibility with a very similar question. Furthermore, the same authors (1981: 99, 292–93) offer evidence against the easy assumption that small differences in phrasing closed alternatives necessarily affect distributions. Although the possibility of such effects remains in any particular instance and makes further empirical tests always desirable, we proceed here on the assumption that neither response order nor minor aspects of wording has a major impact on the univariate distribution to the closed question.

Table 1. Responses to Open and Closed Forms of the Most Important Problem Question^a

Response	April 82		June 82		October 82		July 83		December 83	
	Open	Closed	Open	Closed	Open	Closed	Open	Closed	Open	Closed
High cost of living, inflation	16.1%	22.3%	16.1%	22.5%	5.8%	21.7%	5.3%	20.0%	2.1%	15.3%
Unemployment	28.0	42.6	28.2	39.3	42.9	45.5	41.5	45.3	22.3	28.0
Nuclear war, war	5.9	14.7	8.0	16.2	3.7	12.2	6.3	13.5	23.8	30.3
Budget cuts	1.6	7.6	2.9	10.5	1.0	3.2	—	6.5	0.7	10.3
Interest rates	1.1	0.5	3.4		1.6				0.4	0.4
Government deficit	1.6		0.6	1.0	1.6	3.7	1.0	2.4	2.1	4.2
General economics n.e.c.	9.1	0.5	9.2	1.6	11.0	1.1	6.8	0.6	7.1	1.5
Soviet aggression	1.1				0.5				0.7	
National defense	1.1	0.5	1.7	0.5	1.0	0.5	1.4		2.1	0.8
U.S. involvement in specific countries (e.g., Lebanon)	1.1				0.5		2.4		6.0	
Foreign affairs, n.e.c.	3.2		5.7	1.0	4.2	0.5	7.2	1.8	5.7	0.8
Crime	4.3	2.0	4.0		3.1	1.1	1.0	0.6	2.8	0.4
Food, energy shortages	1.1		1.1		1.0		1.4			
Moral, religious breakdown	5.4	2.5	5.7	3.1	6.8	2.1	7.7	2.9	7.4	0.8
Distrust of government	2.7	1.5	4.0	1.6	3.7	0.5	1.9	1.2	3.9	0.4
Other government defects	3.8	1.5	4.0	0.5	1.6	3.7	2.4	1.2	2.1	1.9
Other/more than one coded response	10.2	2.5	4.6	1.0	9.4	3.2	10.6	4.1	7.8	4.6
Don't know	2.7	1.0	0.6	1.0	0.5	1.1	2.9		2.8	0.4
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
N	186	197	174	189	191	189	207	170	282	261

^a Open Question: "What do you think is the *most* important problem facing this country today?"

Closed Question: "Which of the following do you think is the *most* important problem facing this country today—the high cost of living, unemployment, the threat of nuclear war, or government budget cuts—or if you prefer, you may name a different problem as most important."

employment," and "budget cuts") were mentioned often enough at that point (February 1982) to seem to require inclusion as closed alternatives, with the first two the clearly dominant open responses at the time. ("Budget cuts" was far behind cost of living and unemployment, and just slightly ahead of responses under the general heading of "war.") We shall use the term *common categories* to refer to these four alternatives, since they were presented as choices on the closed form and also served as code categories for the open form. Other noncommon categories were developed as needed to accommodate other types of responses that did not fit the four common categories.

The closed version of the MIP question differed from the typical closed survey question by providing an explicit legitimization of "other" responses: it included after the four alternatives the statement "or, if you prefer, you may name a different problem as most important." This was done in order to avoid creating question form differences by fiat. Thus the total set of open and closed categories parallel each other to the extent that the two forms elicited the same types of responses. The legitimization of "other" responses to the closed question led to an average of 15 percent of the answers falling outside the four common categories with little variation (11–17 percent) across the five surveys. The 11–17 percent contrasts with figures of less than 2 percent in earlier experiments where such legitimization was not provided (Schuman and Presser, 1981).

Despite this amendment to the closed question, the open form produced many more noncommon category responses than did the closed, though most of these led to additional categories that were either very small or else were vaguely miscellaneous in nature (e.g., "general economic conditions, not elsewhere classified"). Furthermore, the overall proportion of open responses that fell into the four common categories considered as a totality is remarkably constant over the 21-month period: for the five surveys the percentage in the common categories on the open form varies within the narrow range of 49 to 55 percent, with no discernible trend up or down over time. In sum, even though proportions among the four common categories in Table 1 shift markedly over the 21 months, the open/closed comparisons deal, so far as we can tell, with much the same subpopulation (i.e., that part of the national population located within the common categories on each form) at all five time points.³

Main Results

OPEN/CLOSED DIFFERENCES IN MENTIONS OF NUCLEAR WAR

The hypothesis that the nuclear war threat is seldom mentioned to the open question because of its low salience cannot be adequately tested by simply comparing the open and closed percentages for this category in Table 1. Each of the four common categories shows an increase in percentage between open and closed forms, which will usually be the case as one moves from an open question to a closed

³ The one noncommon category of some frequency was "breakdown of morals and religion," but it also changes little in its proportion over the period we tracked, and we therefore assume that movement between it and the common categories was not an important influence on the latter during this time period.

question constraining respondents to a small number of specified categories. A more meaningful test of the hypothesis is to ask whether the nuclear war choice shows a greater open to closed form increment than do the other three categories.

To determine whether low salience does in fact reduce nuclear war responses on the open form, we use the chi-square test to compare the distributions for the two forms, with the null hypothesis being that salience is *not* a factor on the open form and therefore that the two distributions will not differ. Furthermore, in order to focus specifically on the nuclear threat alternative as against all others, the other three common categories are collapsed, creating a 2 by 2 chi-square test for each of the five years. When such a test is carried out, in three of the five surveys there is no significant difference between the two forms. Moreover, in one of the two months in which the forms do differ significantly ($p < .05$ in October 1982, and $p < .02$ in December 1983), the ratio of nuclear war responses to the other three collapsed categories is actually higher on the open form than it is on the closed form (December 1983). These results argue against the hypothesis that an artifactual limitation in the open question accounts for infrequent mention of the nuclear war threat on that form.

In addition, looked at in more absolute terms, in none of the first four surveys does the proportion of respondents choosing nuclear war as the most important problem on the closed form ever reach one out of five, whereas unemployment claims almost half the respondents in two of those months. This hardly suggests that respondents, when reminded of the nuclear war threat, gravitate toward it in great numbers. To be sure, in the fifth month the percentage choosing nuclear war on the closed form rises to 30 percent, but at that point the parallel open form common category shows almost as high a proportion. In sum, the low salience explanation for infrequent mention of nuclear war on the standard MIP question is not confirmed by the data in Table 1.

THE UNIMPORTANCE OF NUCLEAR WAR FOR THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

In four of the five closed question data sets shown in Table 1, the threat of nuclear war went unchosen by more than four-fifths of the population sampled. If this is not due to the form of the survey question, then it becomes plausible to conclude that much of the public does not share the belief of Dyson and others concerning the paramount importance of the nuclear threat. In an attempt to understand this relative lack of concern about nuclear war, we asked those respondents in our last two surveys who did *not* choose nuclear war on the

Table 2. Reasons for Not Choosing "Threat of Nuclear War" on Closed Questions^a

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>Percent</i>
1. Denial that nuclear war is possible E.g., "I don't think there will ever be a nuclear war. It is no threat. One country will not destroy the other or take a chance."	20.9
2. Nuclear war not an immediate problem E.g., "Because the threat of nuclear war is sort of remote, but unemployment is a problem right now in this area."	25.0
3. Nuclear war is out of my control E.g., "Well, you've got to live while you're alive. It's something that we can't do anything about."	8.1
4. Combination of 1 and 2	7.8
5. Combination of 1 and 3	1.3
6. Combination of 2 and 3	5.3
7. Repeat of original response to closed question (E.g., "It's very difficult for young people to acquire homes and cars with inflation as it is.")	17.2
8. Other	10.9
9. D.K.	3.4
	100.0
	(N) (320)

^a The question read: "We are also interested in *why* people think one problem is more important than another. For example, can you say why you think [R's answer to closed question] is more important than the threat of nuclear war?" Data are combined from July and December, 1983; the distributions of responses for the two months do not differ significantly.

closed form why they made a different choice.⁴ A coding of their open answers to this follow-up question is provided in Table 2.

Although such after-the-fact explanatory answers must be treated with caution, they seem in this case to provide some genuine insight into why the threat of nuclear war is mentioned so infrequently in Table 1. If we put aside the proportion (17 percent) who simply reiterated that the problem they chose (unemployment or inflation in most cases) was a very important one, there were three major explanations, which were sometimes given in combination.

The most frequent explanation was that nuclear war is something to worry about for the distant future, but that unemployment/inflation/budget cuts is an important problem here and now. "I know nuclear war could happen, but it's not an everyday problem," said one respondent. The second most frequent explanation given was out-and-out

⁴ The same follow-up question was asked in both July and December, 1983. The proportions giving various answers did not differ significantly between the two months, despite the higher frequency of the nuclear war choice in the latter month, and we have therefore combined the two samples of follow-up responses in Table 3 in order to provide a more adequate number of cases for review. The exact wording of the follow-up question is given in the footnote to Table 2.

denial that a nuclear war is possible: "Nobody is crazy enough to start a nuclear war." Finally, the third type of explanation frequent enough to call for a separate category was that the problem is one the respondent can do nothing about. This last explanation, which was the least frequent, is the only one where the threat of nuclear war might possibly be seen as judged truly most important by the respondent despite not being given as a spontaneous answer. The other two substantive categories really involve denial, the one in an absolute sense, the other by projecting the issue into a fairly distant future. In the latter case, the respondent may not be much more worried about nuclear war than he or she would be on reading about the likelihood of another ice age in some thousands of years. Even where the probability of future disaster is more imminent, as in the case of earthquakes for Californians, there is not much evidence that this creates *continuing* concern on the part of the local population.

The explanations for unemployment or inflation that are merely repetitions of the original choice also suggest that the respondent does not treat the threat of nuclear war as a very serious possibility when confronted with it, though we should also note that such repetitions tend to be given disproportionately by those with lesser education. Considering other demographic correlates, the most striking is that for sex: men are nearly twice as likely as women to deny the possibility of a nuclear war ($p < .001$), and women are nearly twice as likely as men to say that a nuclear war is out of anyone's personal control ($p < .01$). Seeing nuclear war as a distant problem is not disproportionately characteristic of either sex, but it is significantly more frequent among younger than among older persons. (The same is true for more as against less educated persons, though age is the stronger correlate here.) None of these correlates modifies the basic outcome of the follow-up inquiry: respondents have little difficulty explaining why they do not consider the threat of nuclear war to be the most important problem facing the country today.

CHANGING THE FRAME OF REFERENCE: FROM NATION TO WORLD

We took one further step to make certain that the MIP question was not inadvertently missing potential nuclear war responses. Since the question refers to problems facing "this country today," it is conceivable that respondents are led to think primarily of domestic or purely national issues, whereas nuclear war may come to mind mainly within a larger international frame of reference.

To check this possibility, we carried out a split-ballot experiment in November 1985 in which the standard open MIP question was paired with a version identical in every respect except for substituting the

phrase "the world" for "this country." With this new phrasing ("What is the most important problem facing the world today?"), respondents concerned about the threat of nuclear war are provided full opportunity—in fact, almost encouraged—to give such an answer.

The national telephone sample for this new experiment was small, but the results are unequivocally negative. Of the 56 people who received the standard "country" version, only 16 percent mentioned nuclear war; of the 46 people who received the "world" version, 19 percent mentioned nuclear war—a trivial and nonsignificant ($X^2 = 0.2$) increase. The new version of the question did produce more apparently world-related responses like "hunger," and it did not elicit typically domestic economic answers like "unemployment." Yet "nuclear war" did not increase appreciably as a result of the broader international frame of reference.

Overall, our experimental and related follow-up investigations show that it is incorrect to assume that the nuclear war threat has an underlying importance for Americans not revealed in their open responses. The main reason that nuclear war was not given as a response to the open question in much of 1982 and 1983 appears to be that it was not seen to be of paramount importance by respondents, not that it failed occur to them. Even when it was suggested as part of a set of closed alternatives, its selection did not increase greatly. And when asked why not, most respondents reported that it was either not a real problem or not a pressing one as compared with the other problems they saw. Finally, when encouraged to think of problems at the world level, there is still little or no increase in mentions of nuclear war.

THE SUDDEN EMERGENCE OF THE PERCEIVED NUCLEAR THREAT

Between July 1983 and December 1983, "the threat of nuclear war" category rose by 17 percent on the open form of the question and by 16 percent on the closed form (see Table 1). Why did this large increase occur? One of the best publicized news events about nuclear war in the last months of 1983 was the television showing of a film, *The Day After*, about the effects of such a war. The film received so much advance publicity that the Secretary of State appeared on television immediately after its showing in order to justify government policy on arms control. Moreover, an estimated 100 million people watched the program, one of the largest television audiences in the country's history (*The New York Times*, November 27, 1983, p. 11). It seems plausible that the film increased the salience of nuclear war and thus accounted for at least some of the increase in the category on both forms.

The television film was shown on November 20 and our December survey began just three days later. We asked respondents who re-

ceived the open form of the MIP question in December if they had seen *The Day After*. Some 57 percent said they had seen all or part of it, 43 percent none of it. But there is little or no evidence of any effect from the film on mention of nuclear war: 26 percent of those who saw the film mentioned nuclear war on the open form, while 21 percent of those who had not seen it gave the same mention ($p = \text{n.s.}$). Moreover, if the data are separated into 10-day periods, the difference between viewers and nonviewers was smallest (a mere 1 percent) in the first 10-day period. These findings do not prove that the program had no effect on the public, but they do suggest that if there was an effect it was due to the general publicity surrounding the film, not the actual viewing of the film itself. There is one other possibility worth noting: *The Day After* dealt with the consequences of a nuclear war, not at all with its likelihood; perhaps a major television broadcast focusing on the probability of a nuclear war would have more impact on public beliefs of the kind tapped by the MIP question.

A series of real events may well have done much more than publicity about the film to raise public concern about nuclear war between July and December of 1983: news reports about European mass resistance to nuclear missiles; the shooting down of a South Korean airliner by the Soviet Union on September 1 with the loss of 269 passengers and crew; the bomb attack that killed 241 marines in Lebanon on October 23; the invasion of Granada on October 25; and finally the Soviet break-off of arms control talks in late November and early December. At the same time, diminished concern over unemployment and inflation left much of the public (and of the news media) freer to focus on the threat of war. Assuming that all these factors played some role in the dramatic change in responses to the MIP question, both forms of the question picked up the change to about the same degree in our December survey.

MEDIA REPORTS

In order to try to measure indicators of the link between actual events and respondent perceptions of problems, we analyzed a detailed listing of the topics covered by the evening national news broadcasts for the three major television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) for each of our survey months plus the just preceding month.⁵ Each news story was counted if it dealt with inflation, unemployment, nuclear war (including international talks aimed at reducing nuclear weapons), or

⁵ Based on the Index in each monthly volume of the *Television News Index and Abstracts*, published by the Vanderbilt Television News Archives, Vanderbilt University Library.

Table 3. Number of Evening News Reports Dealing with Four Topics^a

	<i>Mar.-Apr.</i> 82	<i>May-June</i> 82	<i>Sep.-Oct.</i> 82	<i>June-July</i> 83	<i>Nov.-Dec.</i> 83
Inflation	12	12	13	11	11
Unemployment	14	18	62	22	14
Nuclear war	71	46	29	63	104
Budget	88	62	33	10	8

^a Indicators counted in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive Indexes

Inflation:	Reports on the Consumer Price Index or the Wholesale Price Index
Unemployment:	Reports on unemployment or employment
Nuclear war:	Reports on nuclear war, atomic weapons, missiles, disarmament, antinuclear demonstrations
Budget:	Reports on federal budget

budget issues. There are important limitations to these data, since we did not have access to broadcast tone or detailed content (e.g., reports on arms control talks might have been optimistic or pessimistic), and in the case of the budget, reports did not necessarily imply budget *cuts*. Still, the data are of some value if these qualifications are borne in mind. The results are presented in Table 3.

Nuclear war and related issues were mentioned frequently in news reports in the first half of 1982, then dropped to a lower level, only to rise to their highest frequency at the end of 1983. The last time point fits our trend survey data for December 1983, but the early time point is higher than the questionnaire responses might lead one to expect. It seems likely that it was the *conjunction* in late 1983 of the more general reports on Soviet-American tension (e.g., the Korean jet liner) and the increase in specifically nuclear-related reports (break-off of disarmament talks) that accounted for the abrupt rise at the end of that year in mentions of the threat of nuclear war on both open and closed forms. More routine reports touching on nuclear arms in early 1982 apparently did not greatly affect public definitions of important problems. These had been primarily stories about ongoing arms control negotiations and about the nuclear freeze movement, but they were not accompanied by direct evidence of military action or of sharply increased Soviet-American tension.

The media results support our earlier conclusion that the enduring threat of nuclear war is not seen as paramount in importance by the public. It is only when the possibility of war is heightened by concrete events that the nuclear threat becomes important, and even then it may be involvement in a particular war (as in Vietnam or potentially in Central America), rather than the threat of a nuclear war, that usually becomes the focal issue.

Other Open–Closed Question Differences

Although our primary concern with open-closed form differences stemmed from our interest in the nuclear war response, it is useful to draw more broadly on the five survey experiments to determine whether question form had effects in ways not directly connected with our hypothesis about the nuclear response as such.

At the gross level of ranking of issues by the public, the answer is no. For four of the five time points, the rankings of the four common category issues are identical on the open and closed question forms, and for the remaining time point (July 1983) there is only a single minor reversal between ranks 2 and 3. Thus, if interest is only in discovering which issues are most frequently chosen as “most important,” our evidence is that the two forms will ordinarily lead to the same conclusions, assuming, of course, that the closed form includes as alternatives the main issues that come to the fore on the open form.

However, closer examination of the open-closed comparisons provided by Table 1 leads to the following additional conclusion: the less frequently an issue is mentioned spontaneously to the open MIP question, the greater its increase in choice on the closed question. At the extreme, “budget cuts” is a response that is never given by more than 3 percent of the population to the open question, but it is chosen several times more often when offered as a closed alternative. That this example is not simply an accident due to peculiarities of the budget cut issue, to sampling error, or to the use of percentage scales is shown by a systematic analysis of all common categories with frequencies transformed into logits. “Budget cuts” represents only the extreme case of what is a quite general effect in these data across categories and across months for any given category.⁶

A plausible interpretation of this effect is that the closed question form makes all responses equally salient and that some people choose as most important an alternative such as “budget cuts” that would not otherwise have come to mind. Who are the people most likely to do this? It is useful to think of the closed common category samples as composed of two parts: those people who would have mentioned one

⁶ Space constraints prevent inclusion of this analysis, but a copy can be obtained by writing to the first author. It should be noted that had we not had the budget-cut category and not looked systematically at these effects, the open to closed increase for the nuclear war response might well have been confounded with the more general open to closed effect, since the nuclear war open category was relatively small in the first four surveys. In that case, the original hypothesis about artifactual constraint on the nuclear war response in the open form would have been treated as confirmed. As it is, we can see that the open–closed difference is a general one, likely to apply to any reasonably important issue that is seldom mentioned spontaneously to the open MIP question.

Table 4. Unemployment and Inflation Responses and Rates by Month and Question Form

<i>Responses and Rates</i>	<i>April 1982</i>	<i>June 1982</i>	<i>October 1982</i>	<i>July 1983</i>	<i>December 1983</i>
Unemployment					
Open form	28	28	43	42	22
Closed form	43	39	46	45	28
Inflation					
Open form	16	16	6	5	2
Closed form	22	23	22	20	15
Rate of unemployment	9.0	9.4	10.2	10.0	8.4
Rate of inflation	7.6	6.6	5.9	3.4	3.9

NOTE: Response percentages are taken from Table 1, rounded off. The inflation rate is that for the second month preceding the month shown; the unemployment rate is that for the month preceding the month shown.

of the four common categories even on the open question, and those who would not have given a common category open response but who feel constrained on the closed form to choose among the common categories. It seems likely that it is mainly the latter set of people who migrate disproportionately to the low-frequency common categories. Such an interpretation will require panel data for more definite confirmation, but we can predict that almost any intrinsically important but seldom mentioned issue will show a relatively large jump in popularity when added to a limited set of MIP closed alternatives.⁷

There is one other slighter effect that may also characterize differences between open and closed MIP question forms, though its reliability is less certain. The open question seems to be somewhat more sensitive to changes in both external events and media attention to these events. This is best seen by tracing over time the trends by form for the common categories of unemployment and inflation. The percentages are reproduced in Table 4, together with U.S. government data on the unemployment and inflation rates for the same period.⁸

⁷ Another process that would tend to increase the size of the smaller common categories on a closed form would be random choices by part of the sample. However, such "guessing" would be expected to occur particularly among less educated respondents, yet the small "budget cuts" category does not show a systematic relation to education on either question form. Thus there is no evidence that guessing plays a significant role in these closed question choices.

⁸ The unemployment rate is the civilian unemployment rate, which is seasonally adjusted. The inflation rate was computed by dividing the CPI-U (Unadjusted Consumer Price Index) for each month by the CPI-U for the same month during the previous year. This figure is therefore also seasonally adjusted. Both rates were reported early in each month-long period in which our survey took place, though one (inflation) is regularly based on data from two months earlier and the other (unemployment) from one month earlier.

Mention of unemployment rises on the open form from 28 percent in April 1982 to 43 percent in October 1982, then drops to 22 percent in December, with the response curve following the curve of the unemployment rate fairly well. Moreover, the major increase in mention of unemployment occurs at the point that the unemployment rate was in the process of "breaking" the 10 percent threshold, a change that received a great deal of attention from the media (see Table 3). On the closed form, however, unemployment shows little or no rise in mentions between April 1982 and July 1983, then a noticeable decline of 20 points in December 1983. With the exception of the last drop, the closed form seems to track somewhat less well the changes in unemployment rates that were an important part of the period under study.

Mention of inflation decreases on the open form from a high of 16 percent in April 1982 to a low of 2 percent in December 1983. The inflation rate itself declined fairly steadily over the period of our study, though perhaps equally important was the fact that it had dropped substantially from the double-digit levels of 1979 and 1980. On the closed form, however, there is little decline at all in the mention of inflation through July 1983, despite the continued drop in the inflation rate, and even the apparent decline of 5 percentage points on the December closed form is small and nonsignificant.

However, none of the open-closed differences over time for unemployment and inflation can be shown to be statistically reliable. If responses are regressed on rates, although the unstandardized coefficients for open responses are larger than those for closed responses for both unemployment (12.2 vs. 8.6) and inflation (3.2 vs. 1.3), the differences do not reach significance ($p > .10$) with this small number of time points. Nor can the more important specific interactions of response by form by time be shown to be significant, such as the greater jump for the open than the closed unemployment category in October 1982. Thus the form difference just outlined, though theoretically plausible and seemingly visible to the eye, remains uncertain in reliability.

Conclusions

Two general hypotheses were investigated in order to account for the apparent lack of public concern over the threat of nuclear war, as indicated by infrequent mention of nuclear war to the standard open question about the most important problem (MIP) facing the country today. The first hypothesis was that the nuclear war issue was seldom mentioned because it is less salient on a day-to-day basis than other issues, despite the fact that at a deeper level the public considers it to

be of paramount importance. We tested this hypothesis by including in a specially created closed form of the MIP question the alternative "threat of nuclear war," on the assumption that a substantial proportion of respondents who did not think of it spontaneously would nevertheless recognize its importance and select it from among the four closed alternatives. Results of five open-closed comparisons failed to confirm this hypothesis: the proportion of nuclear war responses rose on the closed form, but not generally more so than did other alternatives included on the same form. Furthermore, altering the frame of reference of the question to emphasize world rather than national problems increased mentions of nuclear war by only a trivial and nonsignificant amount.

A second hypothesis was that the failure of nuclear war responses to be given frequently to the MIP open question means essentially what it says: over much of the past four decades, most Americans have regarded the threat of nuclear war as less important than other major problems. The lack of a systematic open-closed difference for the nuclear war category is consistent with this hypothesis, and in addition further evidence is found in respondent explanations for why they did *not* choose the nuclear threat alternative on the closed question. Many people said they did not believe a nuclear war to be possible, and many others claimed that the threat is too far in the future to compete with what they saw as current pressing problems. Although one cannot rule out the possibility that such denial may be serving a protective psychic function (Lifton and Falk, 1982), at this point the burden of proof should be on those who offer such an explanation. The fact that nuclear war responses increased sharply in frequency on *both* question forms in late 1983 suggests that Americans are quite capable of giving the responses when events occur that seem to make the possibility of a major war more immediate.

A secondary purpose of our study was to continue the investigation of open/closed question differences begun by Schuman and Presser (1981). In the present comparison of open and closed versions of the MIP question at five points in time, we did not find gross differences in the ranking of problems between question forms. However, we did identify one form difference that seems likely to be quite general: the smaller a category is on the open form, the larger its increase on the closed form. A second possible form difference, which is less reliable in these data, is the somewhat greater responsiveness of the open question to changes in external events, such as a sharp rise in the unemployment rate or in the amount of media attention to such a rise.

However, the role of salience *per se* in influencing answers to the MIP and similar questions is severely constrained by question wording

that calls for judgments within the framework of "importance" to the nation. Mere conspicuousness of an issue in news broadcasts or elsewhere is not likely to turn it into a frequently cited concern unless the public judges it to be of genuine significance. Thus, for all the attention Americans lavish on sports, not a single respondent in our five surveys mentioned an issue connected with sports as "most important," nor for that matter were there references to front-page crime stories or sensational scandals. Thus if there is something wrong with the ranking of nuclear war as less important than more transient domestic issues—including one as fleeting as difficulties due to an extreme cold spell—this has to do primarily with limitations in the public's judgment in dealing with an intangible future, not with the questions that assess that judgment. Observers who have witnessed the proliferation and spread of nuclear weapons over the past 40 years with little public protest should not find this conclusion difficult to comprehend.⁹

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⁹ Of course, media or other attention may be necessary (even though not sufficient) to help the public conceptualize an issue, so that having an "unemployment rate" or an "inflation rate" helps focus public attention. But an even more important factor in shifts in response to the MIP question is its relative nature: one issue may gain or lose in apparent importance simply because another loses or gains, just as the size of a news story is determined by what other stories are available at the same time. Quite likely such relativity accounts in good part for the fact that war-related responses to the MIP question have continued at high levels since 1983, as indicated by Gallup Monthly Reports (e.g., 30 percent in January 1986). The absence of high unemployment and inflation over recent months has allowed issues of war (though not necessarily nuclear war) to move to center stage with relatively little competition.

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