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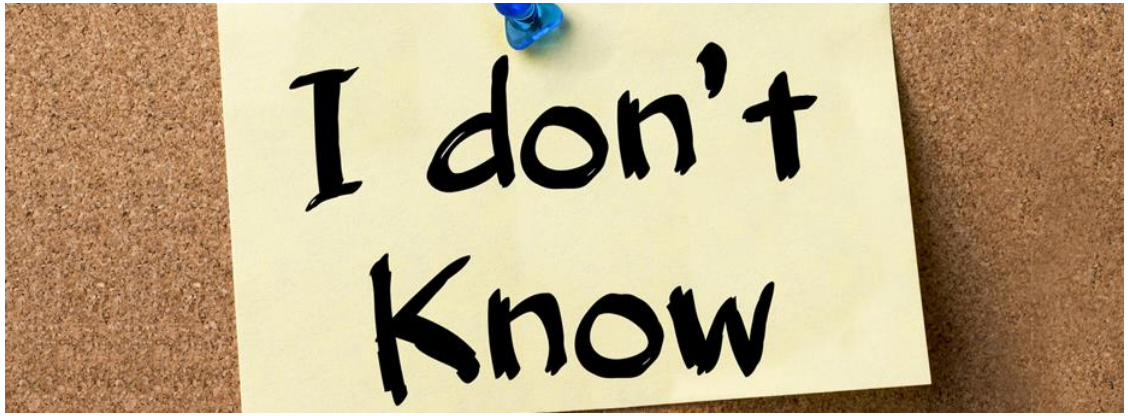



# Do we know what to do with 'Don't know'?

Alice McGee, Tim Hanson, Luke Taylor

*ESRA Conference 2019*
*17 July, Zagreb*

ESRA
EUROPEAN SURVEY RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

# Presentation outline

Background: why investigate this issue?

Experiment design

Experiment results

Conclusions, implications and next steps

## Why investigate this issue?

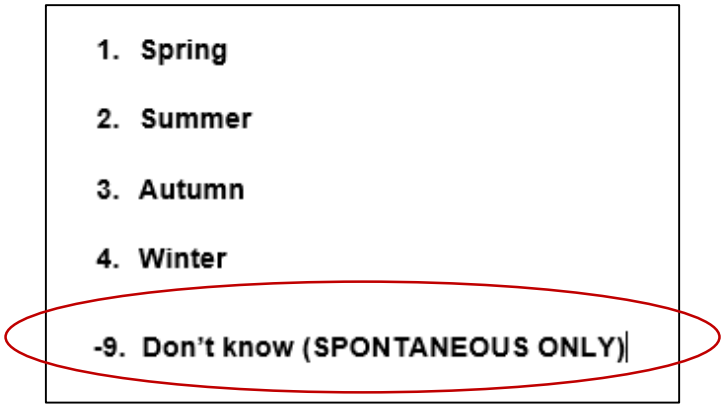
Long-standing debates on inclusion and presentation of DK codes

'Standard' approach for most interviewer-administered (IA) surveys:

**DK codes available to interviewers but not offered to respondents**

Growth of online self-completion (SC) surveys poses new challenges:

- Consistency between modes
- Consistency of trend measurement



## What is currently happening?

Approach taken for DK (and ‘Don’t want to answer’) in online surveys varies between agencies and surveys

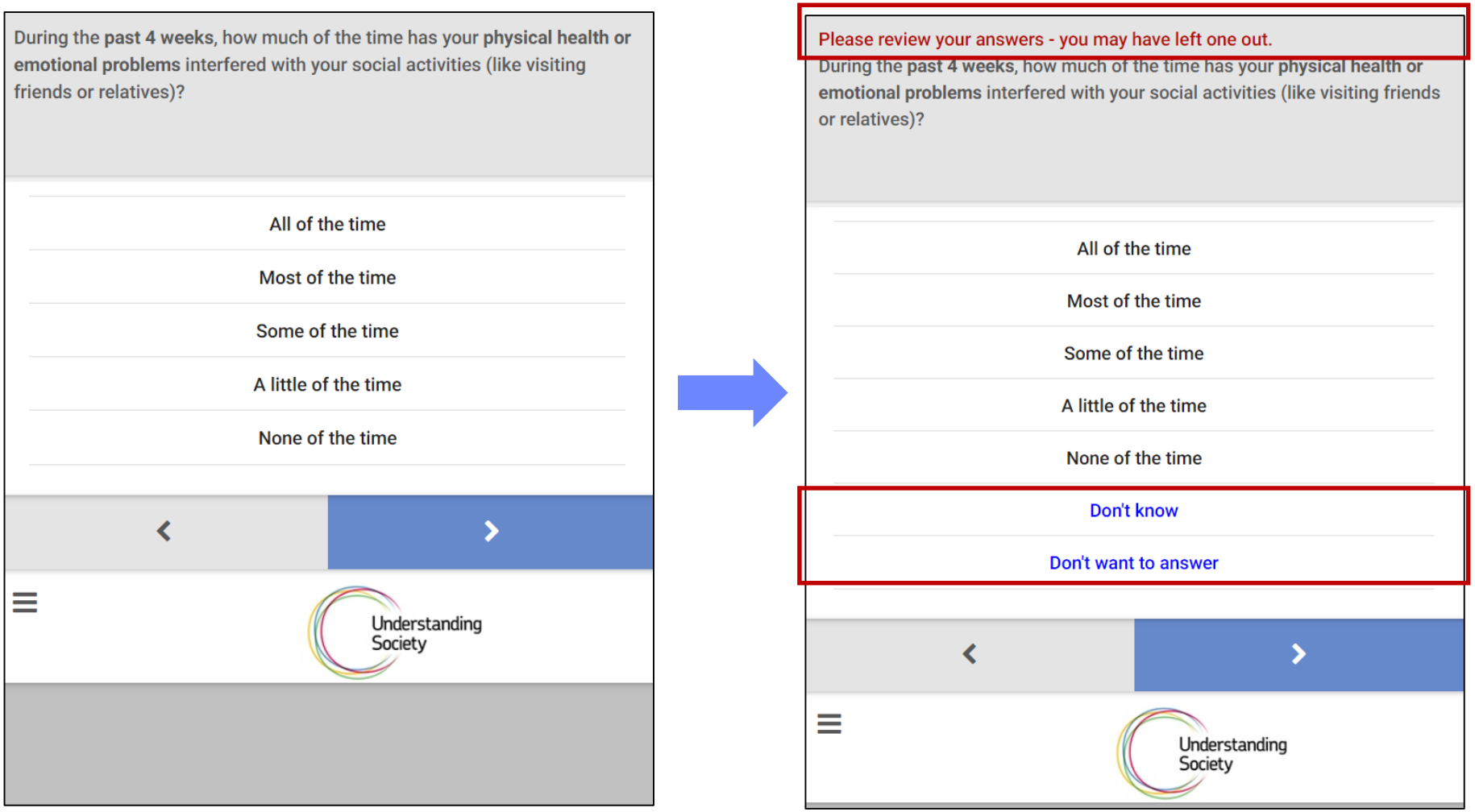
Approaches may differ depending on whether the survey is:

- New
- An existing IA survey transitioning online
- Part of a mixed-mode design

‘Second screen’ design:

- Attempts to replicate existing IA approach for online SC mode

# ‘Second screen’ approach



## Key research questions

Does varying the treatment of DK codes produce different levels of DK response?

How does this vary between different types of question?

What is the impact on the distribution of 'substantive' responses?

When DK codes are less visible, does this result in more 'non-attitudes'?

## Experiment design – treatment groups

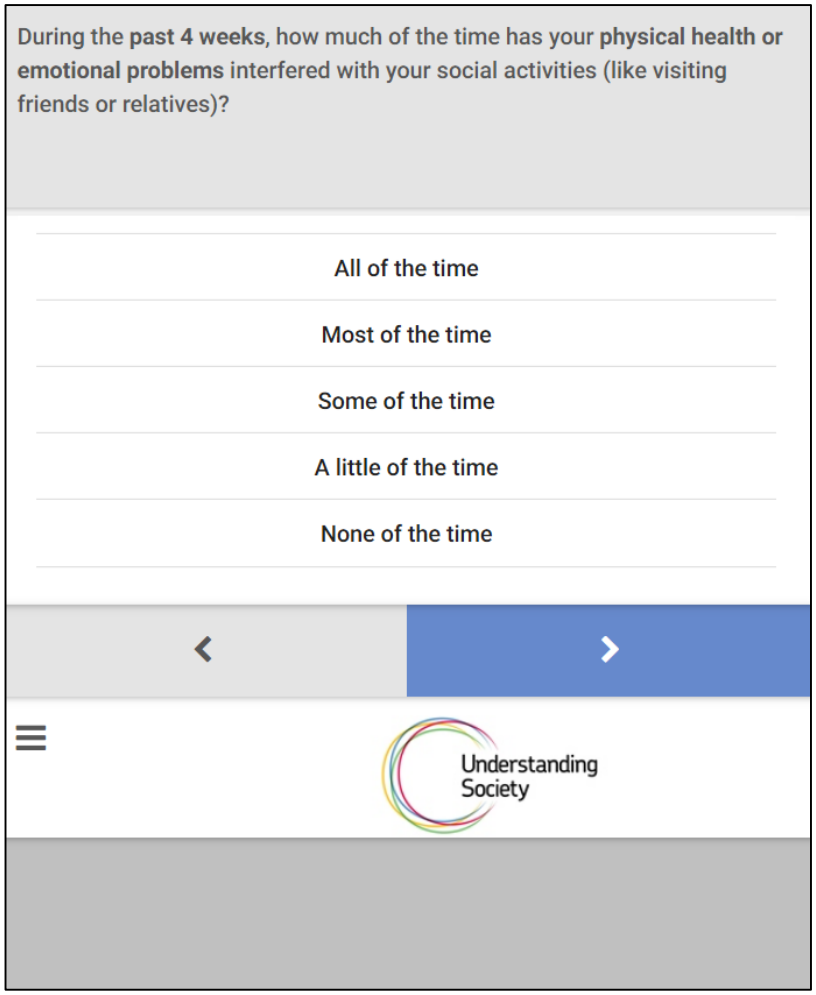
Run on wave 11 of Understanding Society Innovation Panel (IP11) in UK

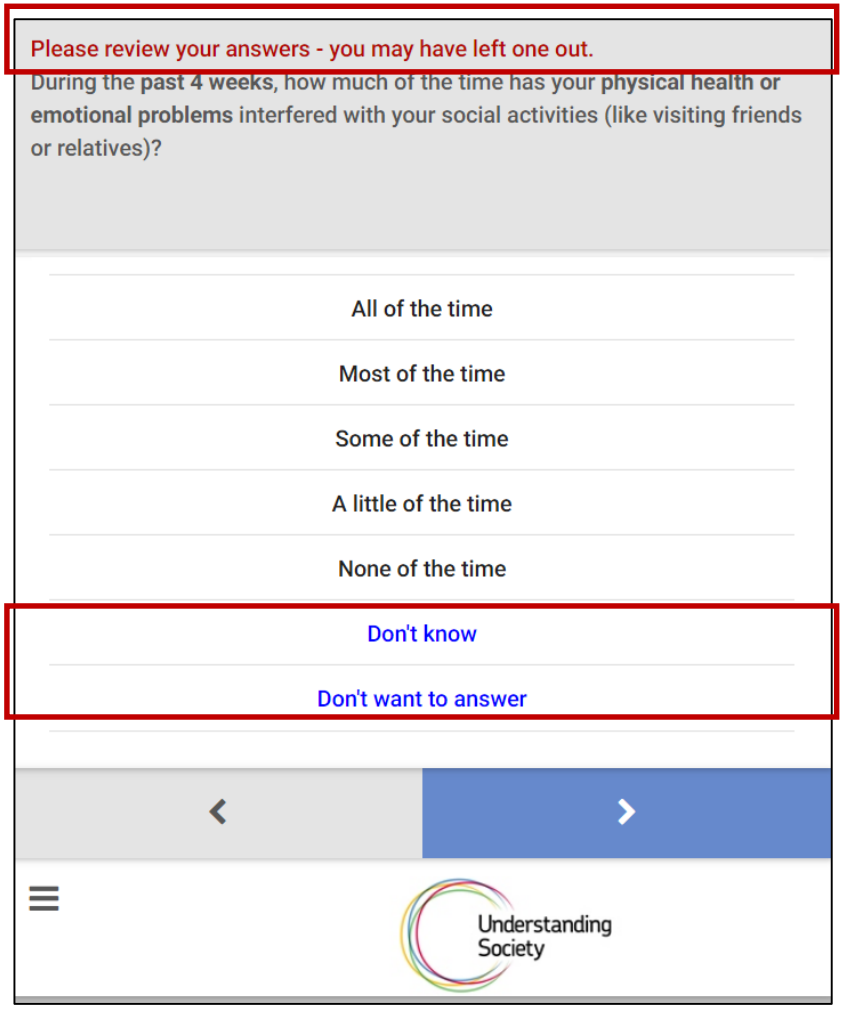
Longitudinal study with a mixed-mode design (mostly face-to-face and web)

Tested three different treatments of DK responses

Respondents randomly allocated to one of the three groups; same allocation for all questions; 850-900 respondents in each group (total of 2,605)

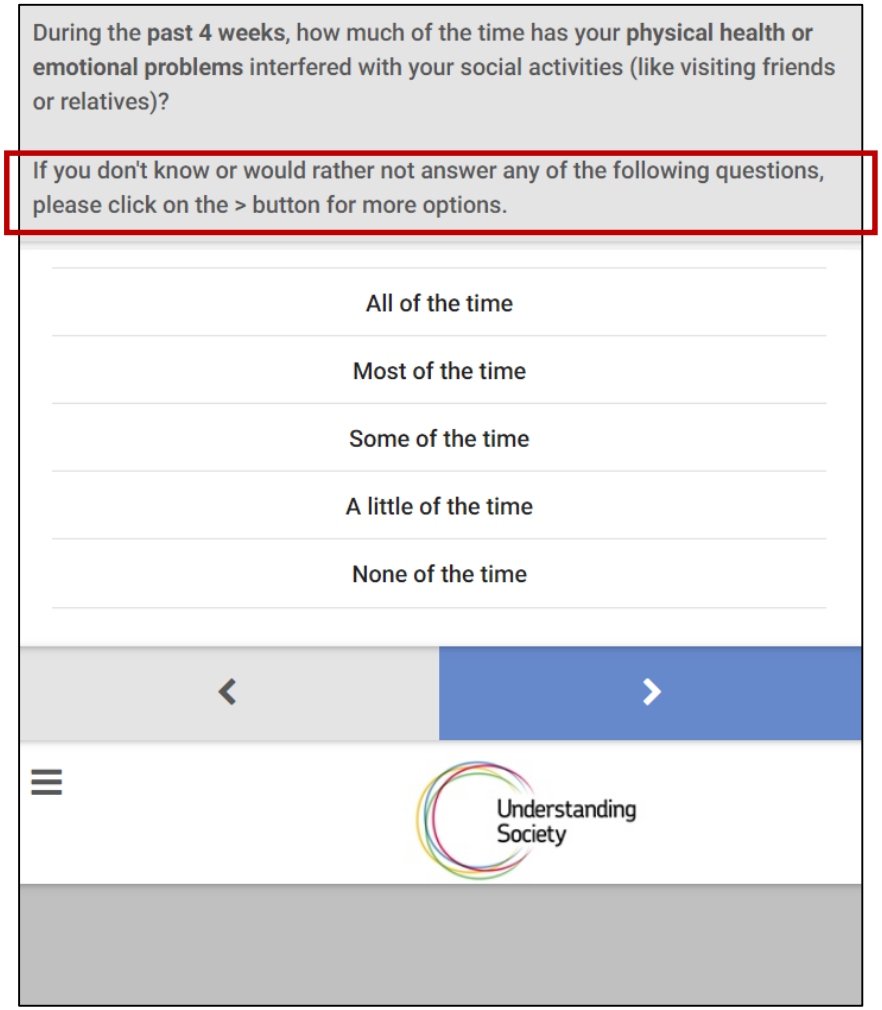
# 1. ‘Hidden DK’ (second screen)



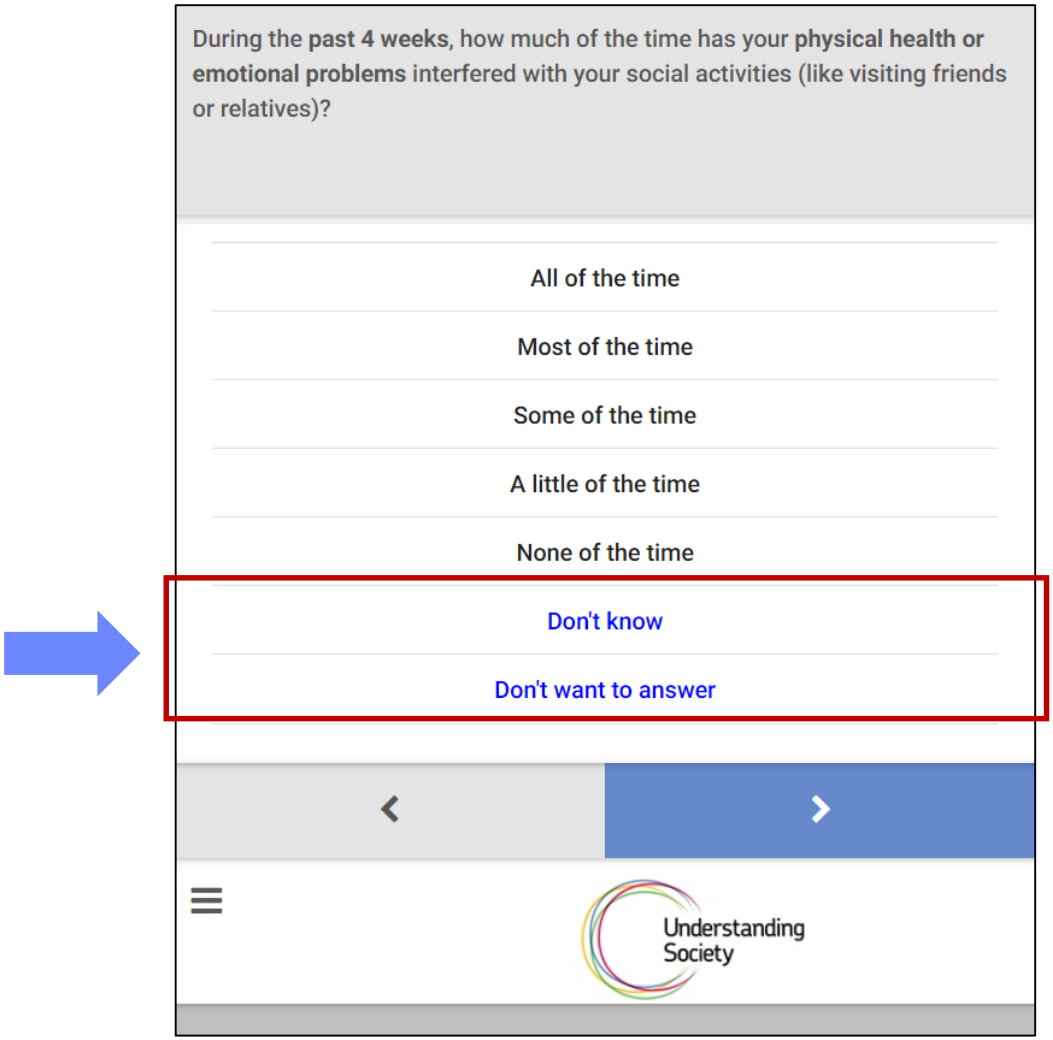
## 2. ‘Prompted DK’

As treatment 1, but with a prompt on each screen for what to do if DK or Don’t want to answer



## 3. ‘Offered DK’

DK and Don’t want to answer codes included as part of main list (always visible)



## Experiment design – questions

Experiment run in web interviews and some self-completion sections of face-to-face questionnaire

Analysis combines the two modes; same pattern found for both modes

26 questions; two types:

- 24 self-assessed health measures
- Two attitudinal questions on topics where salience expected to be low

Follow-up questions asked of attitudinal questions to explore DK responses and answering strategies

# Attitudinal questions: Nuclear energy and the United Nations

**From what you know, or have heard about using nuclear energy for generating electricity in the UK which, if any, of these statements reflects your own opinion?**

- The benefits far outweigh the risks
- The benefits slightly outweigh the risks
- The benefits and risks are about the same
- The risks slightly outweigh the benefits
- The risks far outweigh the benefits
- Don’t know
- Don’t want to answer

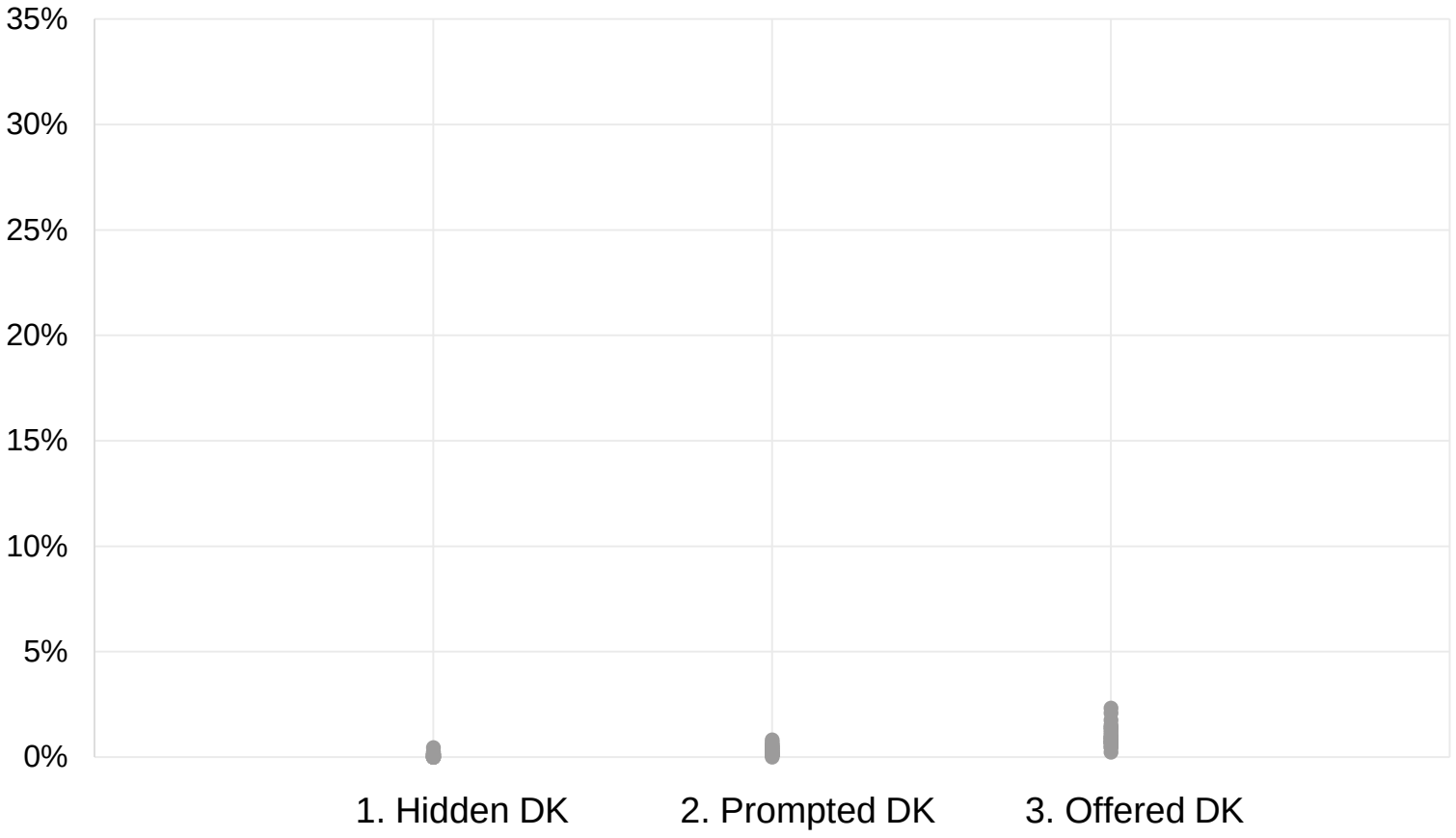
**On a scale from 0-10, how much do you personally trust the United Nations?**

**0 means you do not trust the United Nations at all, and 10 means you have complete trust.**

- 0 – 10
- Don’t know
- Don’t want to answer

## Levels of ‘Don’t know’ response

# Low levels of DK response for all self-assessed health questions



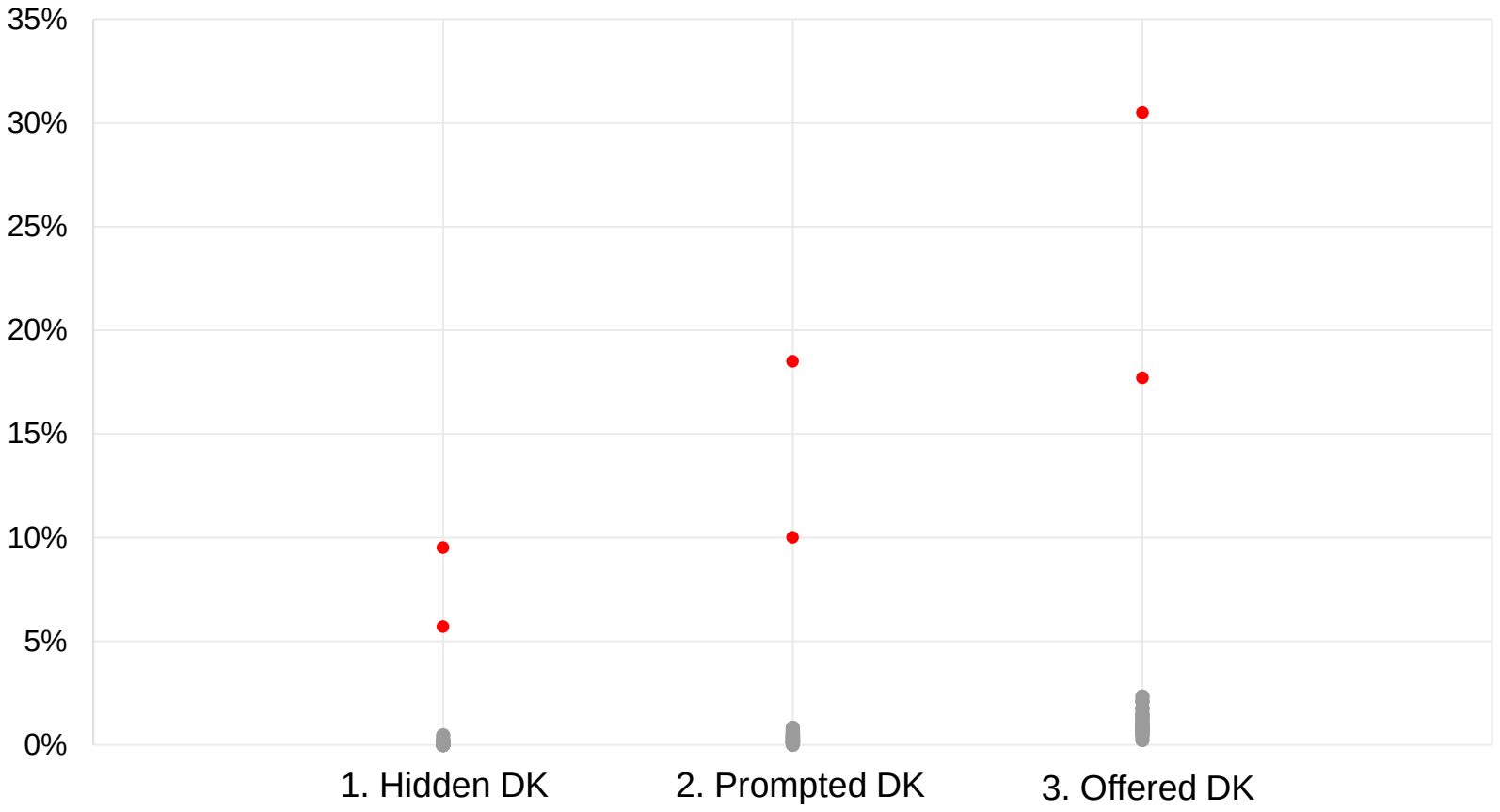

Grey dots = self-assessed heath questions

**Higher DK rate for 'Offered DK' than 'Hidden DK' group at 16 of 24 self-assessed health measures ($p \leq 0.01$)**

**But low levels of DK response for these questions across formats (below 3% for all formats at all 24 questions)**

*Bases: Hidden DK: 887; Prompted DK: 860; Offered DK: 858*

# Large differences based on treatment of DK for low-salience attitudinal questions

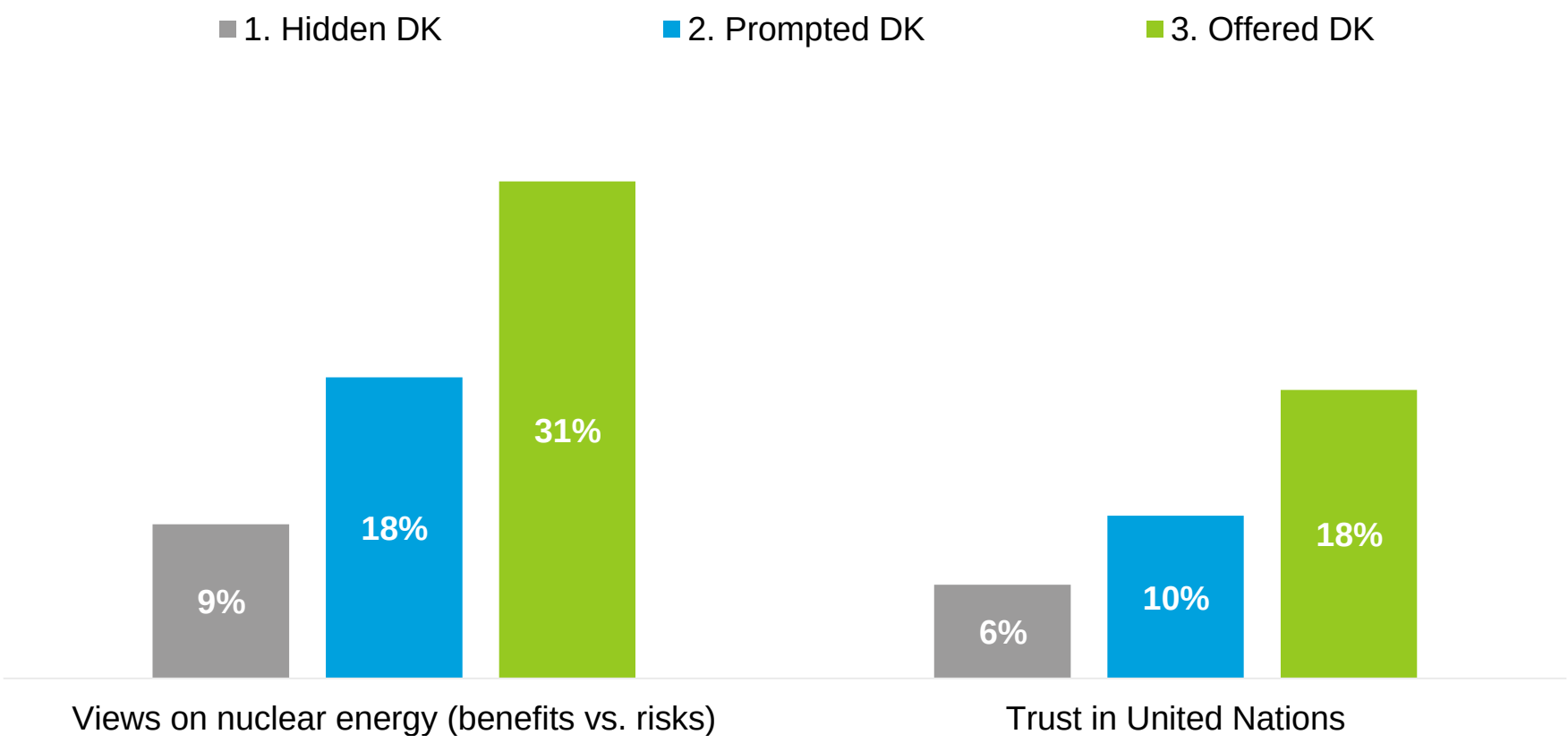



**Grey dots = self-assessed heath questions**

**Red dots = attitudinal questions on nuclear energy / UN**

*Bases: Hidden DK: 887; Prompted DK: 860; Offered DK: 858*

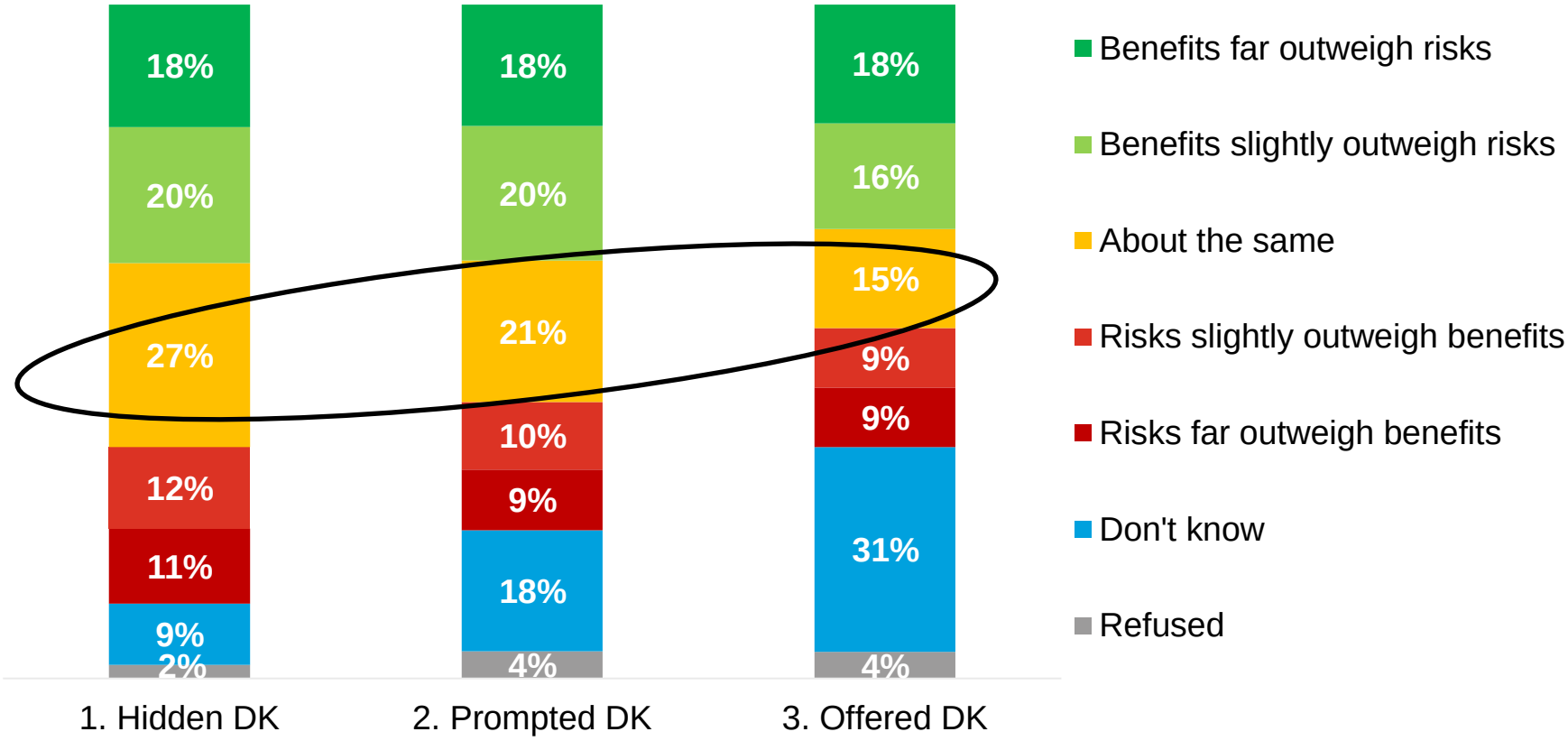
# Large difference in DK rates for attitudinal questions between three groups




*Bases: Hidden DK: 887; Prompted DK: 860; Offered DK: 858*

# Impact on ‘substantive’ responses

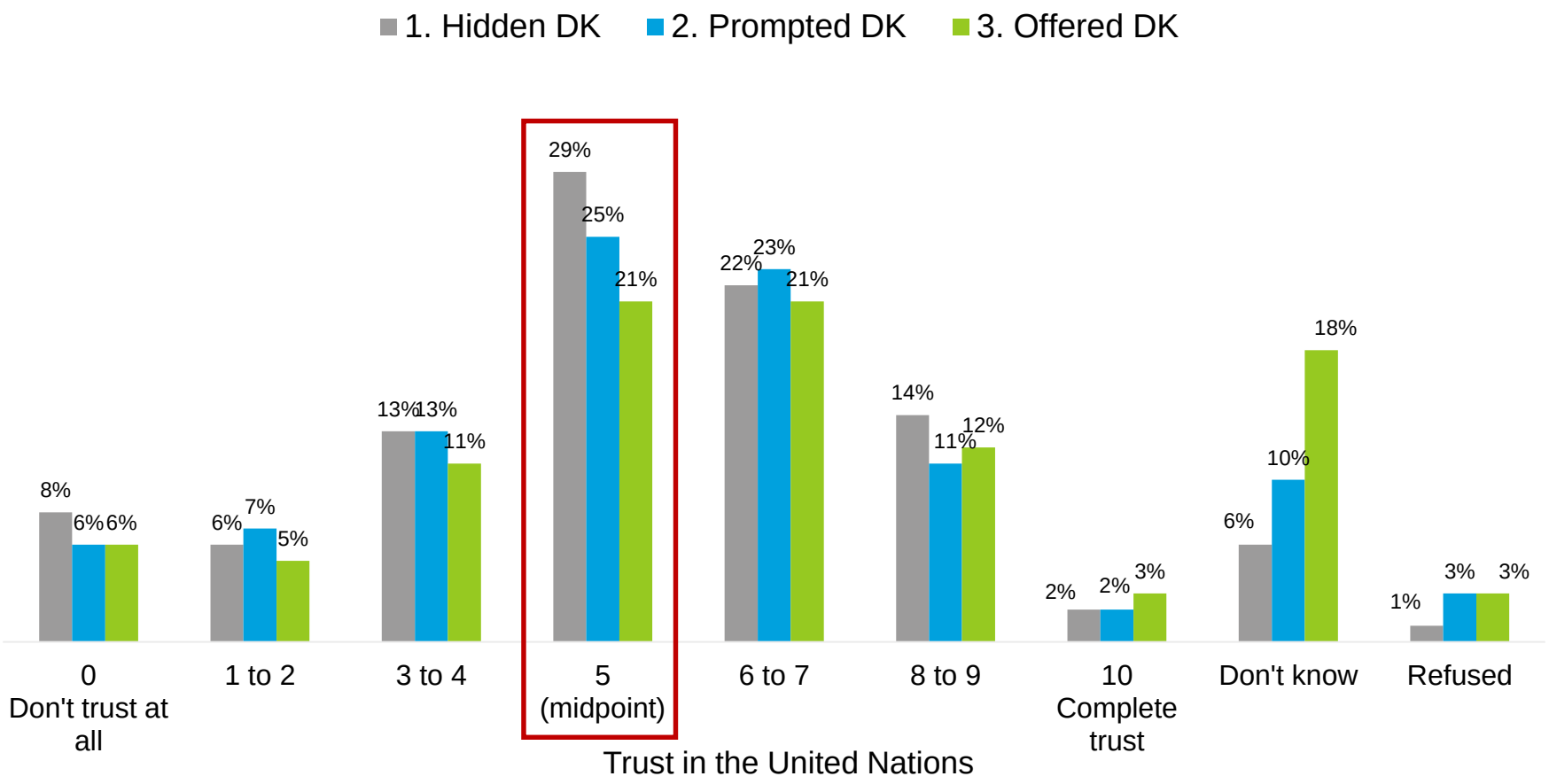
# Where DK codes hidden, greater numbers selected mid-point for nuclear energy question





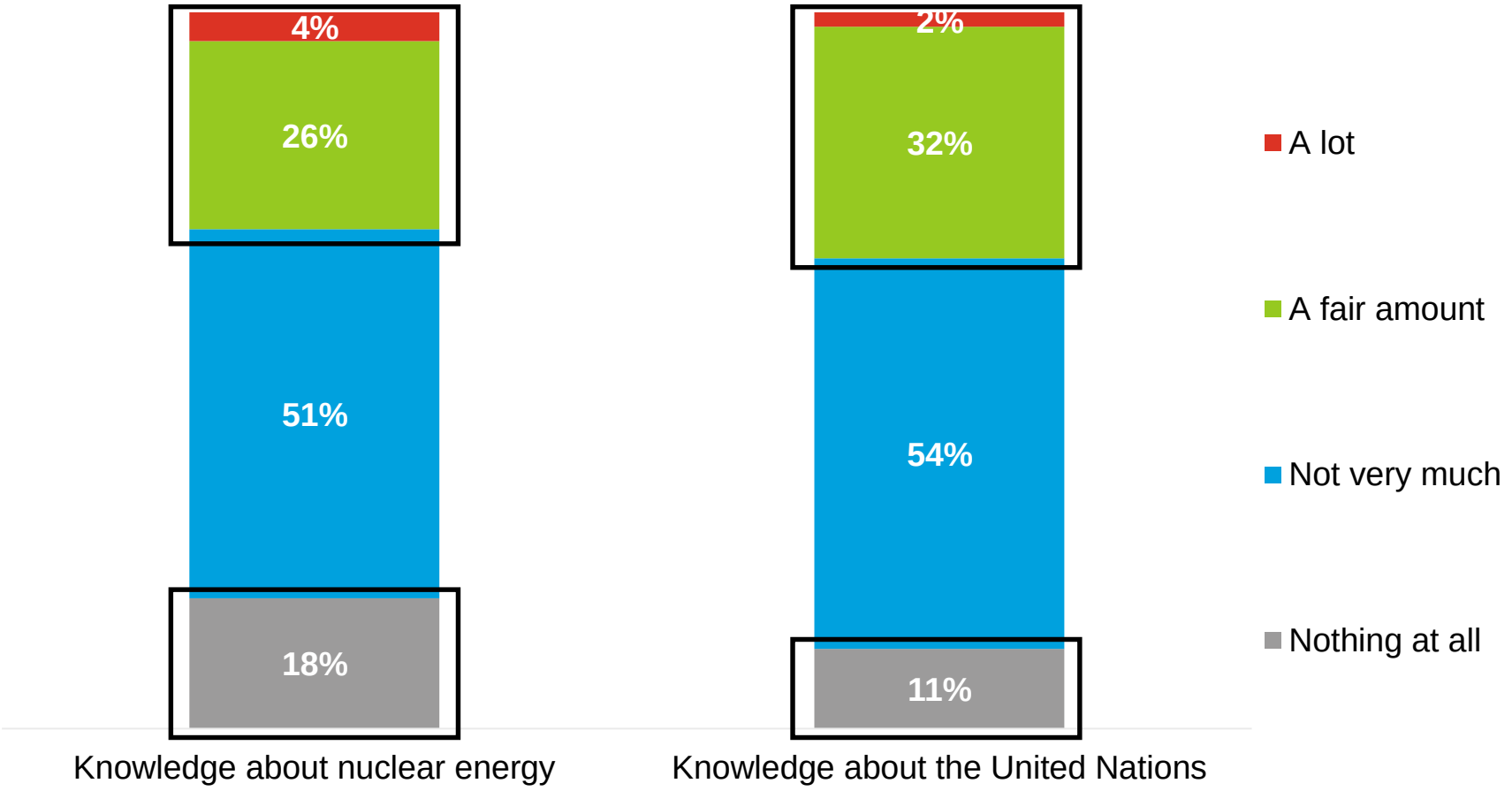

*Bases: Hidden DK: 887; Prompted DK: 860; Offered DK: 858*

# Similar pattern for the trust in UN question



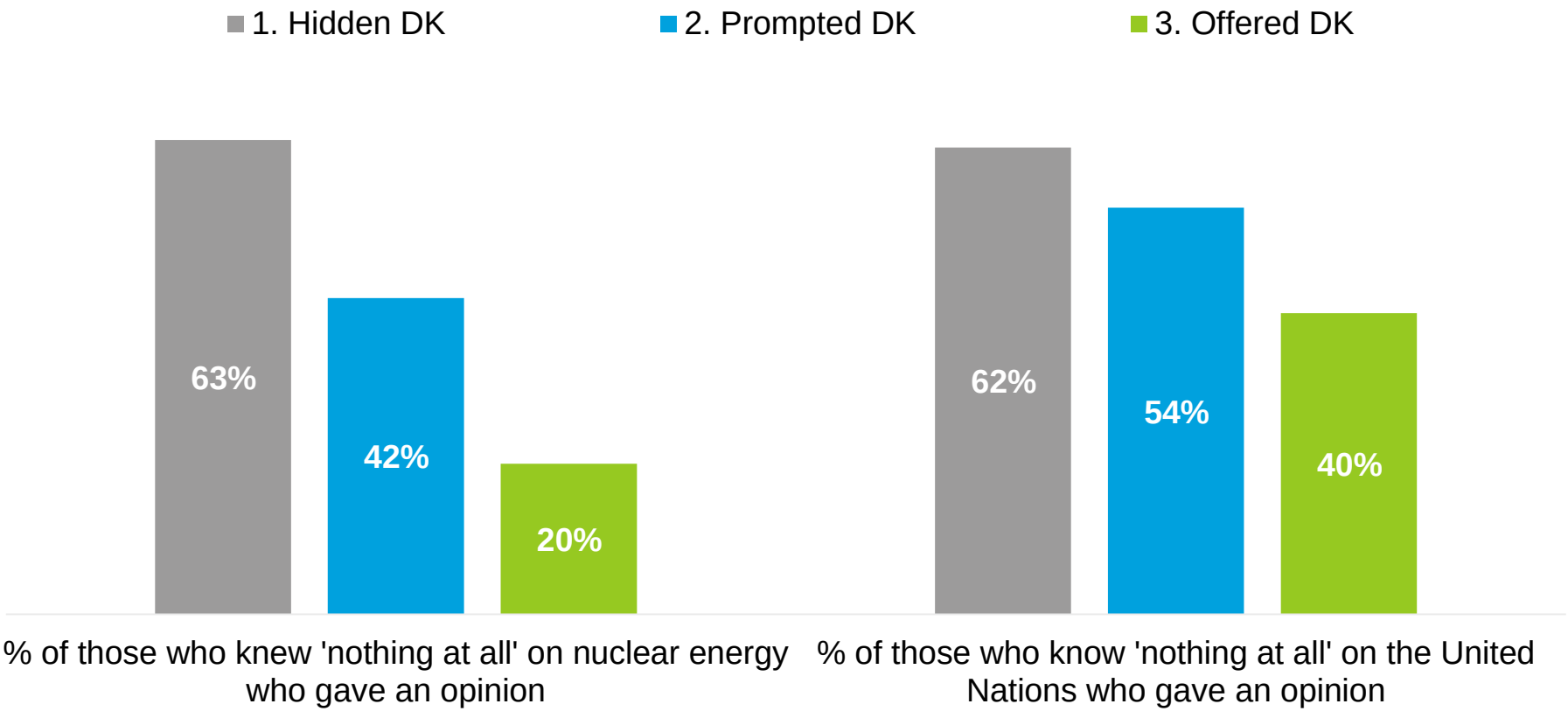
## Proportion of ‘non-attitudes’

# ‘How much would you say you know about nuclear energy/the United Nations?’




*Bases: 2,605 (both questions)*

# Those who know ‘nothing at all’ were more likely to have given an opinion where DK code was hidden

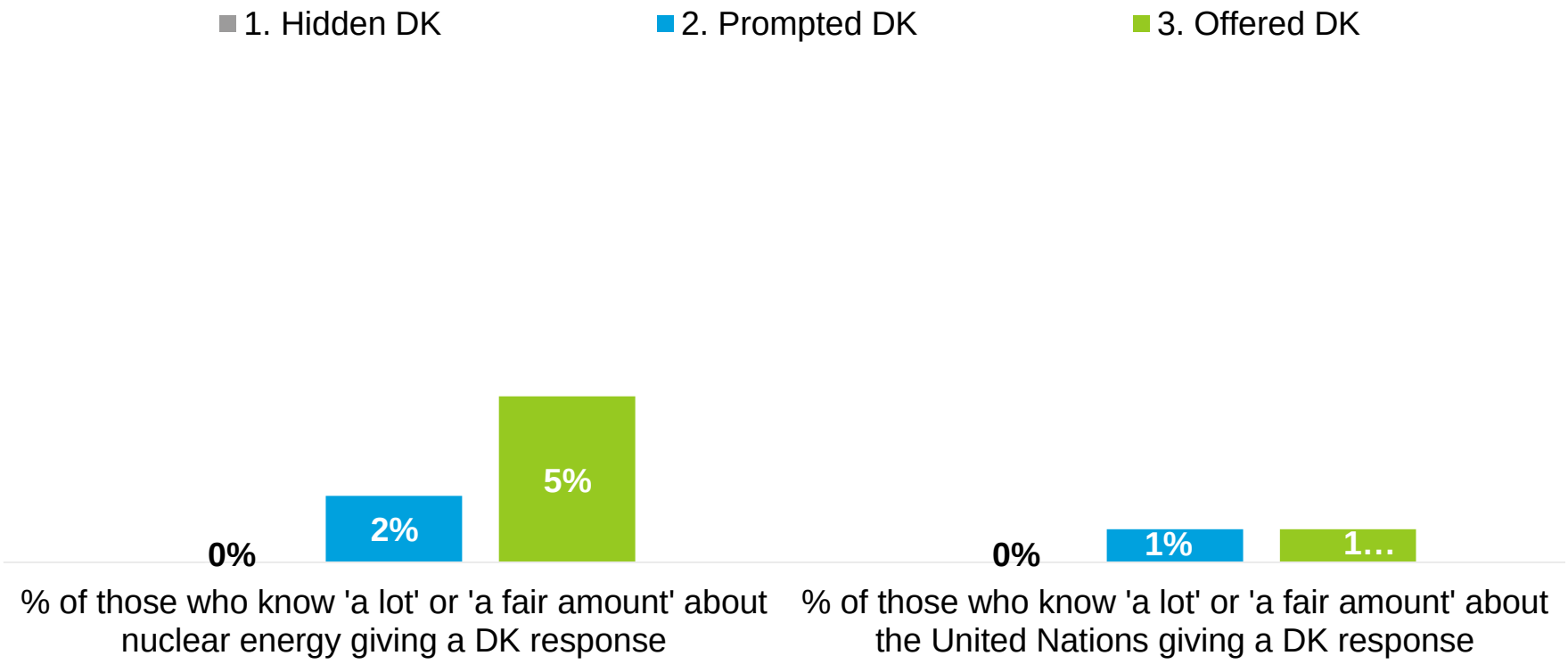





*Bases: Hidden DK: 155; Prompted DK: 139; Offered DK: 140*

*Bases: Hidden DK: 85; Prompted DK: 90 Offered DK: 91*

# Very few who knew ‘a lot’ or ‘a fair amount’ gave DK response




*Bases: Hidden DK: 273; Prompted DK: 250; Offered DK: 232*

*Bases: Hidden DK: 301; Prompted DK: 288; Offered DK: 278*

## Some qualitative evidence that respondents were unaware of option to say ‘Don’t know’ when DK codes hidden

**IF GAVE NON-DK RESPONSE AND SAID THEY KNEW ‘NOTHING’ ABOUT TOPIC:**

**You said that you know nothing about nuclear energy but earlier gave a view on whether the benefits of nuclear energy outweigh the risks. Please can you say why you did not respond ‘don’t know’ to this question? Any information you can provide will help us improve our questions in the future.**

→ Fairly small numbers asked the follow-up question (181 for Nuclear and 136 for UN)

→ Most common response was ‘Don’t know’ – i.e. they don’t know why they didn’t answer ‘Don’t know’!

→ 15-20% in ‘Hidden DK’ group said they didn’t answer DK because there was no DK option or they did not see the option

*Didn't see the don't know option on my screen. Was wondering why there wasn't a don't know option*

*I picked the middle option because I didn't see a don't know option*

*I really don't know. There was no option for don't know on that question*

*Because I feel that we should be using greener energy resources. Even though I don't know anything about nuclear energy, I do know that it's not good for the planet!*

*I don't know about nuclear energy but am sure it's safe*

*Think it's just the word nuclear energy that makes me think it's not safe*

*Getting weary of the questions. Not coordinating my thoughts well!*

*Questionnaire is taking forever!*

# Conclusions

| | |
|---|---|
| **Does varying the treatment of DK codes produce different levels of DK response?** | Clear evidence that varying treatment of DK codes can impact on DK rates |
| **How does this vary between different types of question?** | Largest differences for low-salience attitudinal questions |
| **What is the impact on the distribution of 'substantive' responses?** | DK treatment may impact overall response distribution; more midpoint responses for 'Hidden DK' |
| **When DK codes are less visible, does this result in more 'non-attitudes'?** | Hiding DK codes can result in reporting of 'non-attitudes' for low salience topics |

## Review of current ‘Hidden DK’ approach

- Alternative: offer DK in main response list
- Impact will depend on topic and level of salience

## Consider impact on range of survey designs

- Impact on trend data / time series
- Mixed-mode designs

## Future work

- Apply experiment across a full questionnaire
- Test on different types of surveys (cross-sectional)

# Thank you!

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