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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

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

1. Spring

2. Summer

3. Autumn

4. Winter

-9. Don't know (SPONTANEOUS ONLY)

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

During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time has your physical health or emotional problems interfered with your social activities (like visiting friends or relatives)?

All of the time

Most of the time

Some of the time

A little of the time

None of the time

< >

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Please review your answers - you may have left one out.

During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time has your physical health or emotional problems interfered with your social activities (like visiting friends or relatives)?

All of the time

Most of the time

Some of the time

A little of the time

None of the time

Don't know

Don't want to answer

< >

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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)

During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time has your physical health or emotional problems interfered with your social activities (like visiting friends or relatives)?

All of the time

Most of the time

Some of the time

A little of the time

None of the time

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Please review your answers - you may have left one out.

During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time has your physical health or emotional problems interfered with your social activities (like visiting friends or relatives)?

All of the time

Most of the time

Some of the time

A little of the time

None of the time

Don't know

Don't want to answer

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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



During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time has your physical health or emotional problems interfered with your social activities (like visiting friends or relatives)?

If you don't know or would rather not answer any of the following questions, please click on the > button for more options.

All of the time

Most of the time

Some of the time

A little of the time

None of the time

< >

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3. 'Offered DK'

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



During the past 4 weeks, how much of the time has your physical health or emotional problems interfered with your social activities (like visiting friends or relatives)?

All of the time

Most of the time

Some of the time

A little of the time

None of the time

Don't know

Don't want to answer

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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.

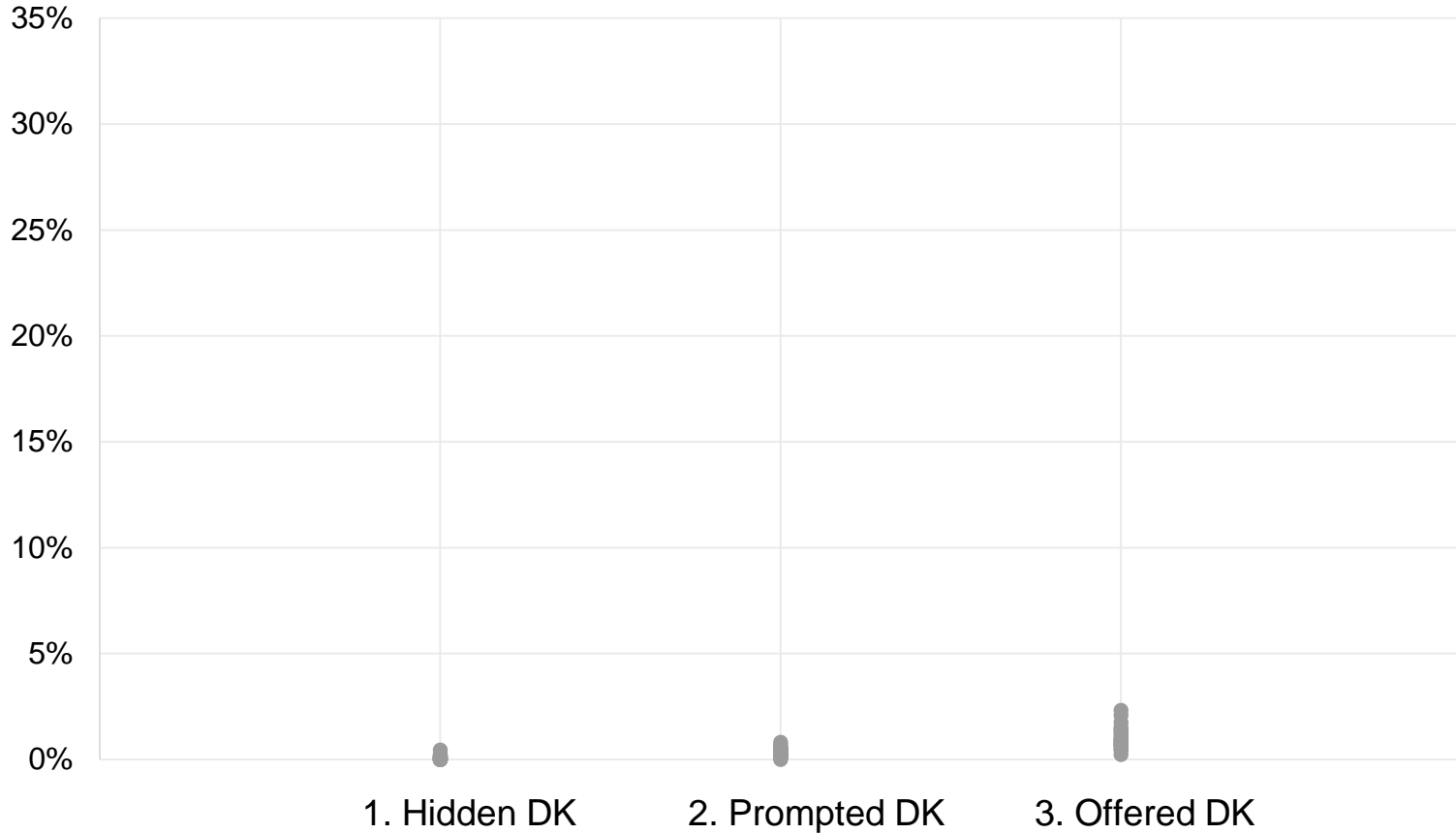
0 – 10

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

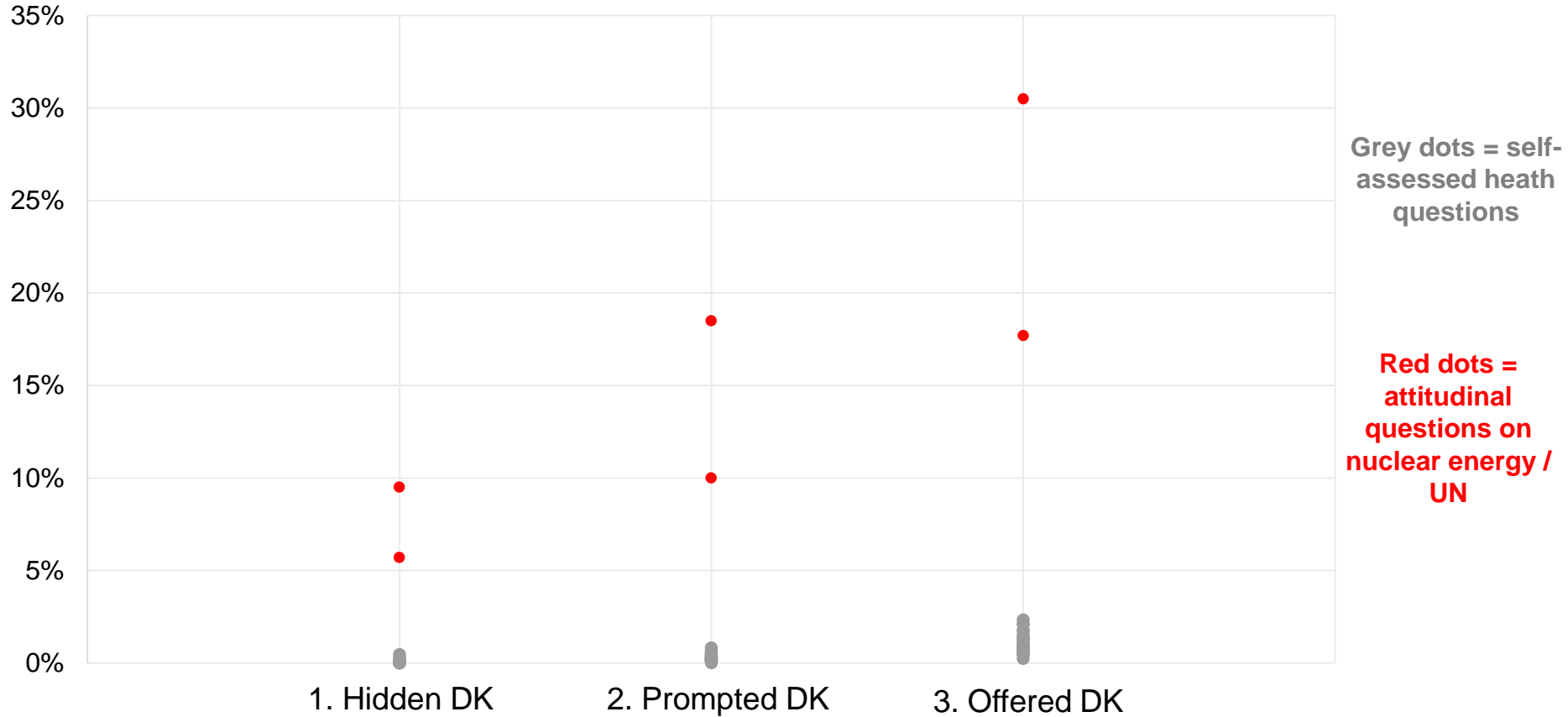


Grey dots = self-assessed health questions

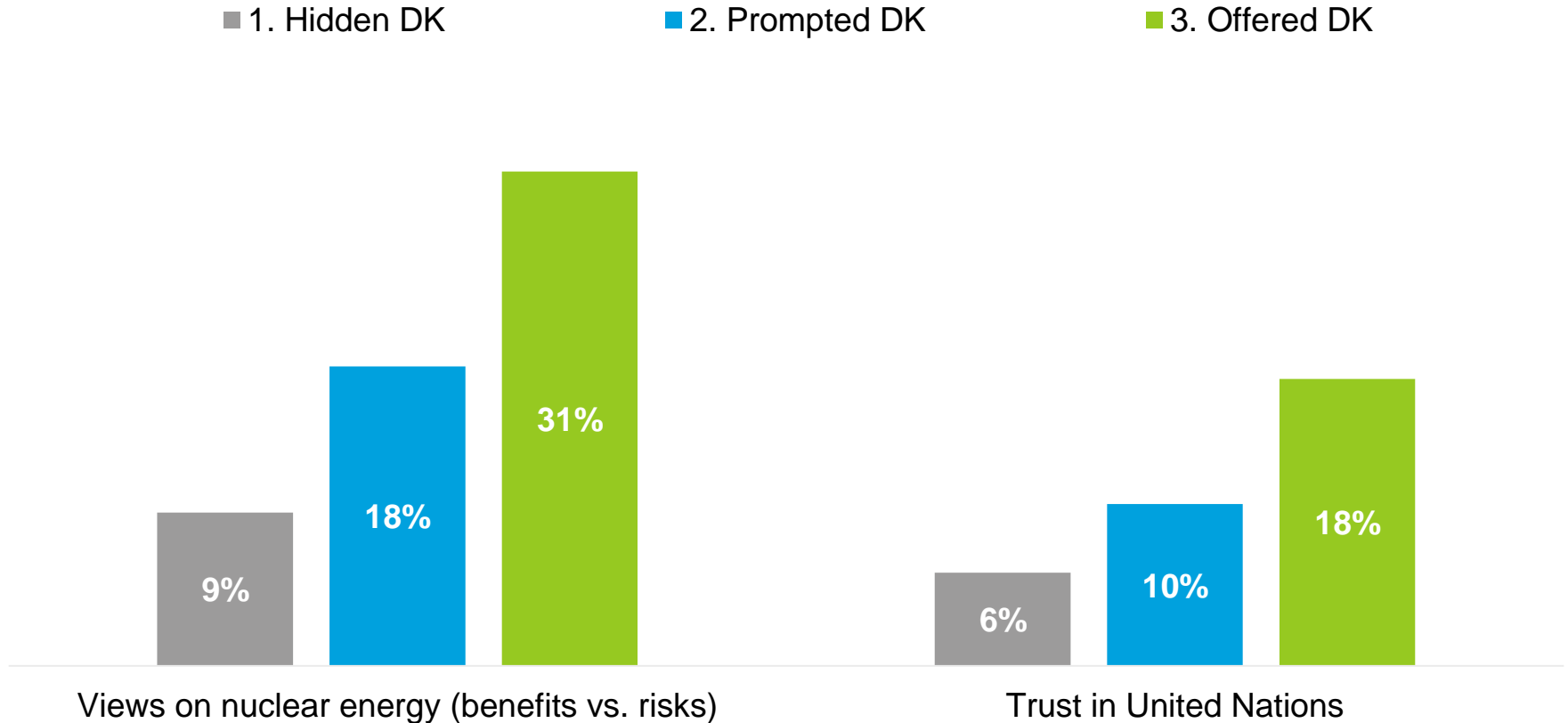
Higher DK rate for 'Offered DK' than 'Hidden DK' group at 16 of 24 self-assessed health measures ($p \leq 0.01$)

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

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

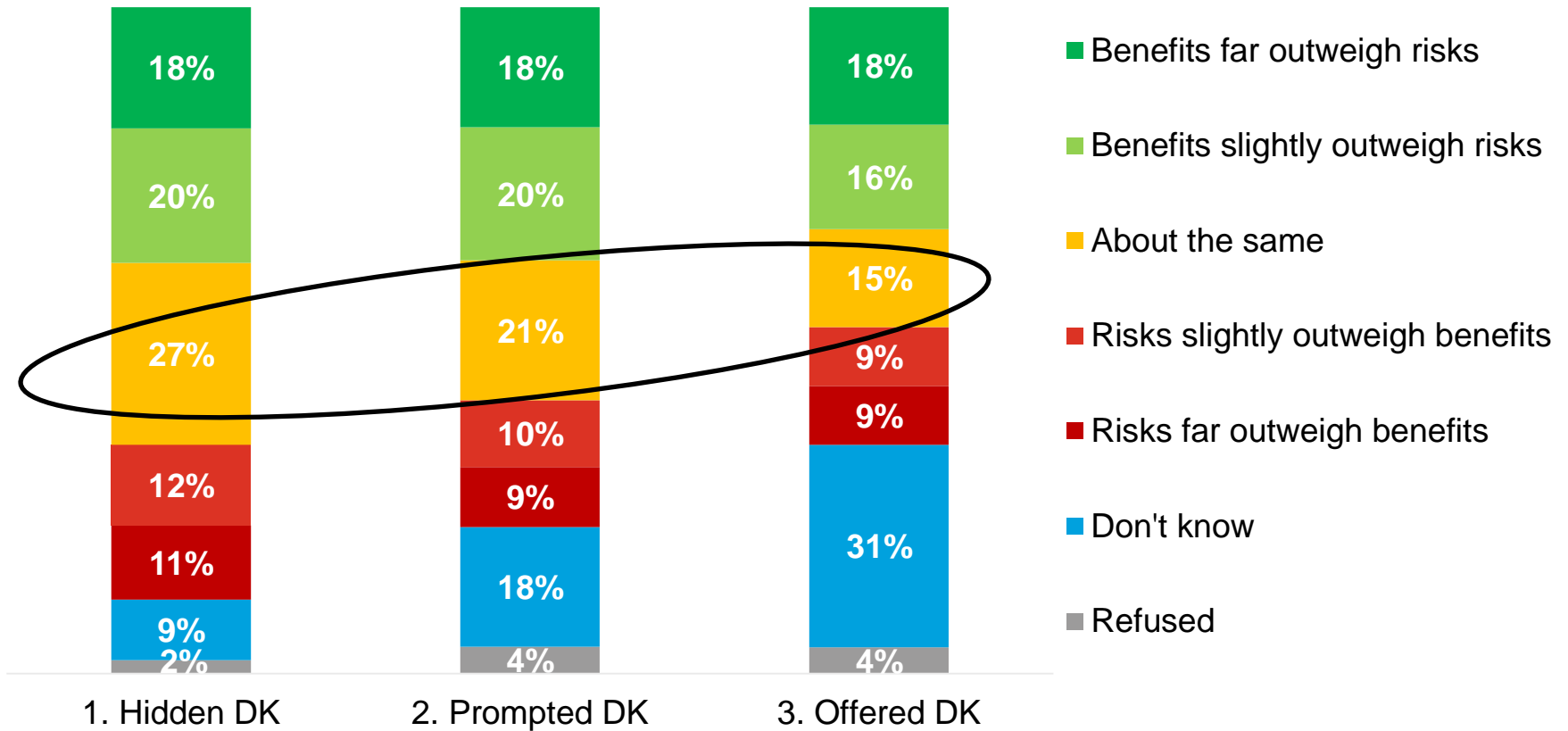


Large difference in DK rates for attitudinal questions between three groups



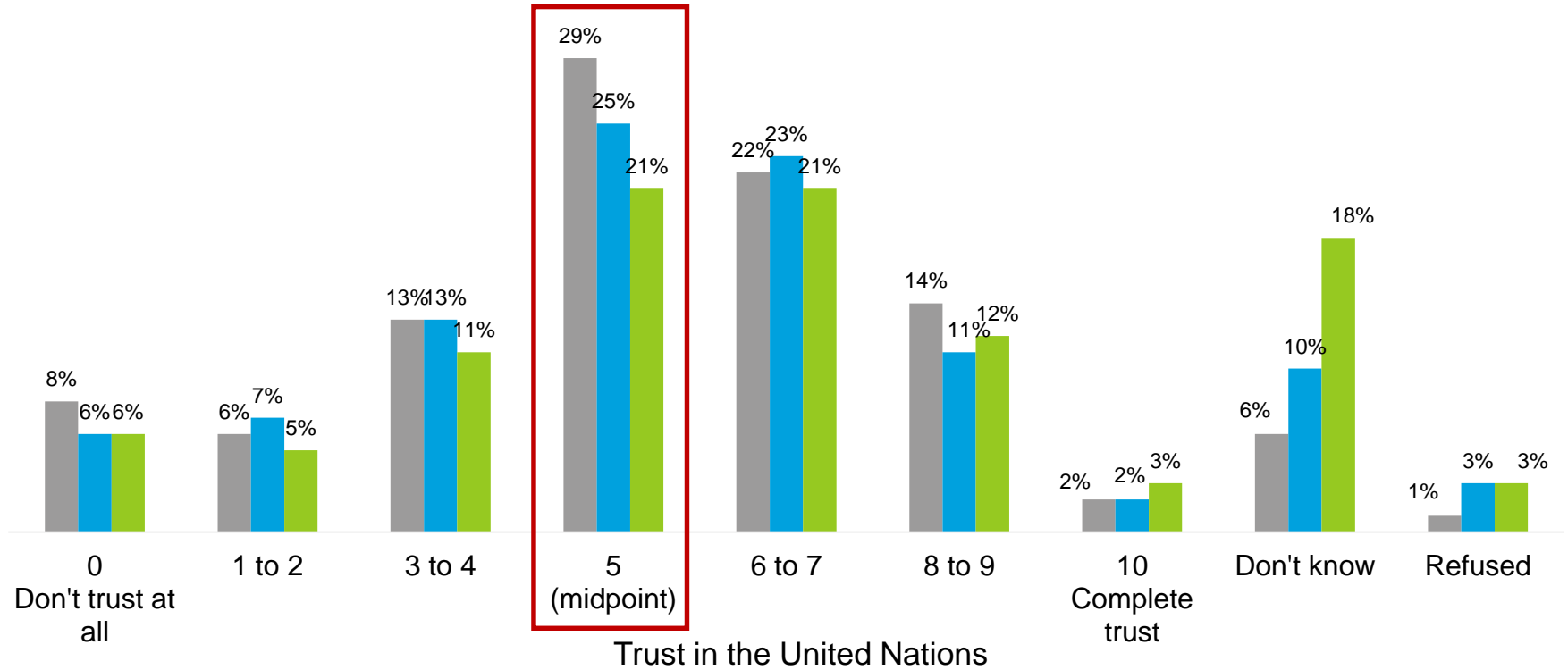
Impact on 'substantive' responses

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



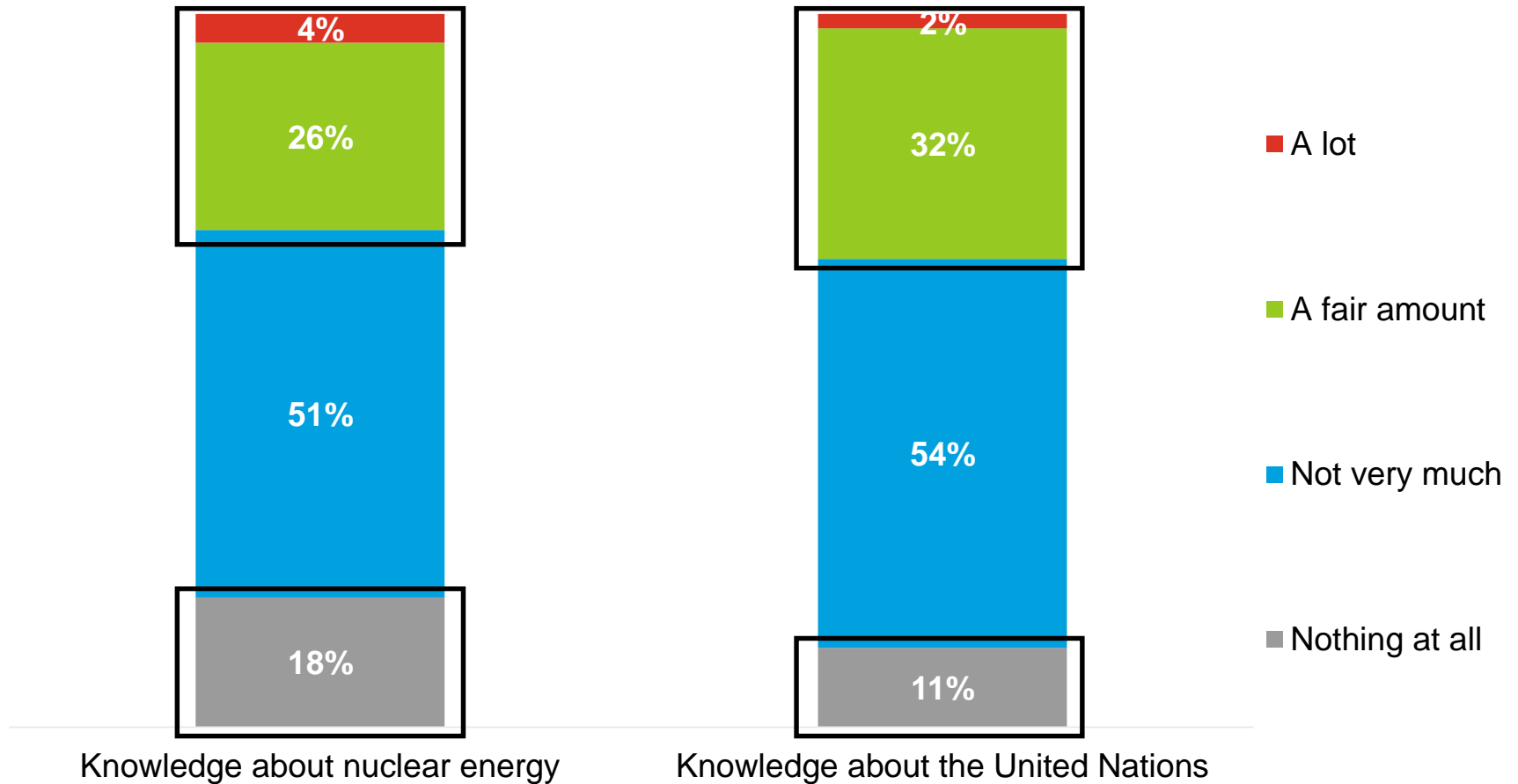
Similar pattern for the trust in UN question

■ 1. Hidden DK ■ 2. Prompted DK ■ 3. Offered DK

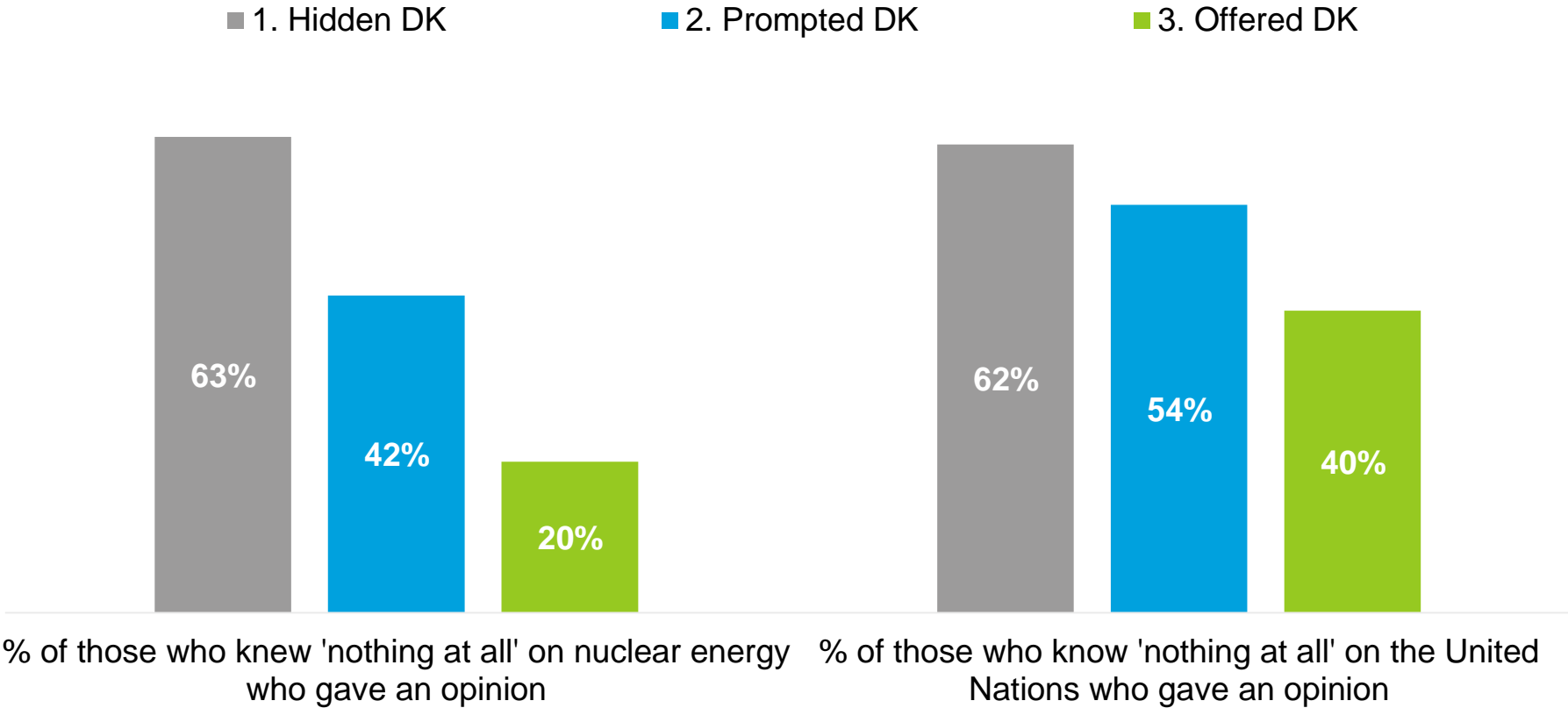


Proportion of 'non-attitudes'

'How much would you say you know about nuclear energy/the United Nations?'

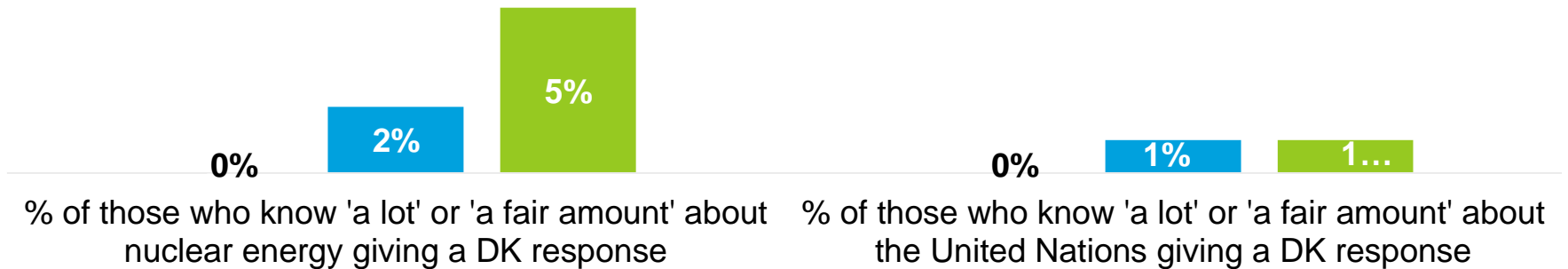


Those who know 'nothing at all' were more likely to have given an opinion where DK code was hidden



Very few who knew 'a lot' or 'a fair amount' gave DK response

■ 1. Hidden DK ■ 2. Prompted DK ■ 3. Offered DK



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

Next steps

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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