

The General Social Survey



An Experiment on Gender-Neutral
Wording Changes for the
Free Expression Items in the
General Social Surveys

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INTRODUCTION

Some longstanding items of the GSS have gender-specific wordings, and most of the attitudes that they are assumed to measure could also be elicited with gender-neutral wordings. When planning for the 2020 survey, the GSS Board concluded that existing gender-specific wordings could become a threat to item-specific response rates, especially for respondents attuned to the evolving language of gender expression. All relevant items were then reviewed, and alternative gender-neutral wordings were developed.

This report details and evaluates the gender-neutral wording changes for the free expression items, building on GSS Methodological Report No. 128 (Morgan 2019).¹ The free expression items received especial attention because the questions point to target individuals that have the intent of expressing nonconformist views. For the existing wordings, three of the six target individuals are strongly gendered: “a man who admits that he is a Communist,” “a man who admits that he is a homosexual,” and “a Muslim clergyman who preaches hatred of the United States.” Compared to responses for these gendered target individuals, it is plausible that revised non-gender-specific target individuals could alter an implicit perception of threat, possibly then generating changes in support for free expression.

Two of the three target individuals could be recharacterized without difficulty as “a gay person” and as “a self-identified Communist” (along with revisions from “he” to “this person” for each domain; see Table 1 below). However, the target individual of “Muslim clergyman” could not be revised in a straightforward fashion because “Muslim clergyman” is inherently awkward. Instead, two alternatives were evaluated with a TESS experiment during the planning phase of the 2020 GSS: “Islamic religious leader” and “Islamic cleric.” As explained in Morgan (2019), the first of these alternative target individuals yielded more consistency of response with the existing target individual, and thus “Islamic religious leader” was scheduled for fielding on the 2020 GSS.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

Since 1973, the GSS has implemented a random half-sample assignment to enable embedded randomized experiments. This design feature can be used to test for the consequences of wording changes, within the full context of the GSS, in order to inform subsequent decisions on whether to shift all respondents to new wordings or to proceed with parallel alternative wordings for random half samples. Using this design, the gender-specific wordings for the 2020 GSS were placed on the standard X form, and the new gender-neutral wordings on the alternative Y form.

¹ In this report, I evaluate primarily the gender-neutral wordings for the free expression items, which comprise a subset of all gender-neutral wording changes. NORC researchers evaluated the full range of gender-neutral wordings during the planning for the 2022 and 2024 GSS. I offer in the appendix some additional analysis of the other changes, which are consistent with the prior work by NORC researchers.

Because the COVID pandemic prevented face-to-face interviews in 2020, the gender-neutral wording experiment was instead debuted on the instrument for the online, push-to-web GSS that was fielded from late 2020 through mid-2021 (hereafter, “the 2021 GSS”). In addition, and because of the difficult-to-assess limitations of the pandemic sample for the 2021 GSS, the experiment was repeated on the 2022 GSS instrument. The 2022 GSS has a mixed-mode design that includes face-to-face interviews as well as an online mode similar to the one used for the 2021 GSS.

WORDING CHANGES FOR THE FREE EXPRESSION ITEMS

Table 1 provides the longstanding and gender-neutral alternative wordings of the free expression items. The Form X wordings are those present in the 2018 GSS and prior years (see also Table 1 in Morgan 2019). The Form Y wordings are gender neutral. The mnemonic variable names from the cumulative file are listed in the table, such as SPKATH for the existing wording and SPKATHY for the gender-neutral alternative wording, where “he” is replaced with “this person” in the interrogative clause. One of each pair of variables is set to a missing value code in the cumulative file for the question wording that the respondent did not receive.

The full experiment was carried out only for the 2021 GSS. For the 2022 GSS, two sets of items – for the militarist and for the gay person – were not fielded. The corresponding six items were discontinued for the 2022 GSS to release questionnaire time for new items favored by the GSS Board.

Table 1. GSS Items on Free Expression in 2021 and 2022, Showing the Experimental Form Differences Between the Original (Form X) and Gender-Neutral Wording Alternatives (Form Y); wording differences emphasized

Reference Individual	Mode and Arena of Free Expression		
	Speech in your community	Teach in college	Book in public library
Atheist			
Form X (original): somebody who is against all churches and religion	SPKATH If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community against churches and religion, should he be allowed to speak, or not?	COLATH Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?	LIBATH If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote against churches and religion should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?
Form Y (gender neutral): somebody who is against all churches and religion	SPKATHY If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community against churches and religion, should this person be allowed to speak, or not?	COLATH Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?	LIBATHY If some people in your community suggested that a book this person wrote against churches and religion should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Racist

Form X (original): a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior	SPKRAC If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community claiming that Blacks are inferior, should <u>he</u> be allowed to speak, or not?	COLRAC Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?	LIBRAC If some people in your community suggested that a book <u>he</u> wrote which said Blacks are inferior should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?
Form Y (gender neutral): a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior	SPKRACY If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community claiming that Blacks are inferior, should <u>this person</u> be allowed to speak, or not?	COLRAC Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?	LIBRACY If some people in your community suggested that a book <u>this person</u> wrote which said Blacks are inferior should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Communist

Form X (original): <u>a man who admits he is a Communist</u>	SPKCOM Suppose this admitted Communist wanted to make a speech in your community. Should <u>he</u> be allowed to speak, or not?	COLCOM Suppose <u>he</u> is teaching in a college. Should <u>he</u> be fired, or not?	LIBCOM Suppose <u>he</u> wrote a book which is in your public library. Somebody in your community suggests that the book should be removed from the library. Would you favor removing it, or not?
Form Y (gender neutral): <u>a self-identified Communist</u>	SPKCOMY Suppose this admitted Communist wanted to make a speech in your community. Should <u>this person</u> be allowed to speak, or not?	COLCOMY Suppose <u>this person</u> is teaching in a college. Should <u>this person</u> be fired, or not?	LIBCOMY Suppose <u>this person</u> wrote a book which is in your public library. Somebody in your community suggests that the book should be removed from the library. Would you favor removing it, or not?

Only 2021:**Militarist**

Form X (original): a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country	SPKMIL If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community, should <u>he</u> be allowed to speak, or not?	COLMIL Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?	LIBMIL Suppose <u>he</u> wrote a book advocating doing away with elections and letting the military run the country. Somebody in your community suggests that the book be removed from the public library. Would you favor removing it, or not?
Form Y (gender neutral): a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country	SPKMILY If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community, should <u>this</u>	COLMIL Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or	LIBMILY Suppose <u>this person</u> wrote a book advocating doing away with elections and letting the military run the country. Somebody in

	<u>person</u> be allowed to speak, or not?	university, or not?	your community suggests that the book be removed from the public library. Would you favor removing it, or not?
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Only 2021:

Gay person

Form X (original):

a man who admits that he is homosexual

SPKHOMO

Suppose this admitted homosexual wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not?

COLHOMO

Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?

LIBHOMO

If somebody in your community suggests that a book he wrote in favor of homosexuality should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing it, or not?

Form Y (gender neutral):

a gay person

SPKHOMOY

Suppose this gay person wanted to make a speech in your community. Should this person be allowed to speak, or not?

COLHOMO

Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?

LIBHOMOY

If somebody in your community suggests that a book the gay person wrote in favor of homosexuality should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing it, or not?

Islamic religious leader

Form X (original):

a Muslim clergyman who preaches hatred of the United States

SPKMMLM

If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community preaching hatred of the United States, should he be allowed to speak, or not?

COLMMLM

Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?

LIBMMLM

If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote which preaches hatred of the United States should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Form Y (gender neutral):

an Islamic religious leader who preaches hatred of the United States

SPKMMLMY

If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community preaching hatred of the United States, should this person be allowed to speak, or not?

COLMMLM

Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?

LIBMMLMY

If some people in your community suggested that a book this person wrote which preaches hatred of the United States should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?

Beyond revisions to the characterization of three of the six target individuals, most other wording changes required the substitution of “this person” for “he.” For the college or university teaching domain, the wordings were already gender neutral for all but one of the target individuals within (e.g., “Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?”). The exception is the admitted communist. Here, the wording was set initially to allow for close comparisons with Stouffer’s classic items (Stouffer 1955; see also Davis 2012).

For all other college-or-university-teaching items, the form X and Y wordings are the same, and thus the mnemonic for the resulting COL variable on the experimental form is not appended with Y. Nonetheless, I will analyze the COL items just like the others, given that a form-based context effect could be present. For example, in the case of the Muslim clergyman on Form X and the Islamic religious leader on Form Y, responses encoded as the COLMSLM variable have a context set by the form difference in the target individual and then the gender differences for the prior question on the speech in the community. Thus, even though the college or university teaching question is not gender-specific even in the longstanding version, respondents may have carried forward an implicit gender association when interpreting the question.

BASELINE RESULTS BEFORE THE EXPERIMENT, 2008-18

Table 2 presents the percentages of 2018 GSS respondents who offered tolerant responses to the 18 free expression items (i.e., approval of the expression). Table 3 then presents the corresponding changes per year in the percentages since 2008, estimated from an underlying logit model with a linear constraint on change. Both tables are updated versions of those offered in Morgan (2019). They are estimated for this report with the newly available post-stratification weight. The patterns are very similar; see the prior report for interpretation.

Table 2. Percent Tolerant of Three Types of Free Expression for Six Reference Individuals, 2018 GSS

Reference individual	Speech in your community			Teach in college			Book in public library		
	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.
Atheist	80.1	(1.5)	[77.1, 83.2]	67.8	(1.9)	[64.0, 71.7]	79.5	(1.4)	[76.8, 82.2]
Racist	57.9	(1.6)	[54.6, 61.2]	43.2	(1.9)	[39.5, 46.9]	60.6	(2.0)	[56.6, 64.6]
Communist	70.0	(1.9)	[66.2, 73.7]	67.7	(1.5)	[64.7, 70.7]	74.4	(1.8)	[71.0, 77.9]
Militarist	71.5	(1.7)	[68.1, 74.9]	60.2	(1.6)	[57.1, 63.3]	74.5	(1.6)	[71.2, 77.8]
Homosexual	89.5	(1.1)	[87.2, 91.7]	88.1	(1.2)	[85.8, 90.5]	85.7	(1.2)	[83.4, 88.0]
Muslim clergyman	46.3	(1.7)	[42.9, 49.6]	33.9	(1.8)	[30.4, 37.4]	51.7	(1.9)	[48.0, 55.4]

Notes: The *N* varies between 1,465 and 1,562 based on the outcome analyzed. Responses of “don’t know” are treated as missing and range between 0.59 percent and 6.09 percent of eligible respondents. Data are weighted by wtssnrps.

Table 3. Change in Percent Tolerant, 2008-2018 GSS

Reference individual	Speech in your community			Teach in college			Book in public library		
	Δ per year	s.e.	p value	Δ per year	s.e.	p value	Δ per year	s.e.	p value
Atheist	0.4	(0.2)	0.019	0.6	(0.2)	0.003	0.6	(0.2)	0.002
Racist	0.1	(0.2)	0.683	-0.3	(0.2)	0.088	-0.4	(0.2)	0.083
Communist	0.5	(0.2)	0.010	0.7	(0.2)	< 0.001	0.5	(0.2)	0.020
Militarist	0.6	(0.2)	0.005	0.7	(0.2)	< 0.001	0.3	(0.2)	0.088
Homosexual	0.6	(0.1)	< 0.001	0.8	(0.1)	< 0.001	0.8	(0.2)	< 0.001
Muslim clergyman	0.4	(0.2)	0.053	0.4	(0.2)	0.071	0.2	(0.2)	0.358

Notes: The *N* varies between 8,586 and 9,025 based on the outcome analyzed. Responses of “don’t know” are treated as missing. Data are weighted by wtssnrps.

RESULTS OF THE EXPERIMENT

Tables 4 and 5 present experimental results for the 2021 GSS and 2022 GSS, respectively. In each table, the percent tolerant elicited with the longstanding wording (the control condition) is subtracted from the percent tolerant elicited with the gender-neutral wording (the treatment condition). Thus, the direction of the treatment effect estimate can be interpreted as the response change attributable to the wording change.

Table 4. Experimental Differences in Percent Tolerant, 2021

Reference individual	Speech in your community			Teach in college			Book in public library		
	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.
Analyzed as a classical experiment, relying solely on randomization to achieve balance:									
Atheist	-0.8	(2.0)	[-4.7, 3.2]	-1.9	(2.3)	[-6.4, 2.5]	0.5	(1.8)	[-3.1, 4.1]
Racist	-3.1	(2.4)	[-7.7, 1.6]	-3.9	(2.3)	[-8.3, 0.6]	1.4	(2.4)	[-3.2, 6.1]
Communist	-3.7	(2.3)	[-8.2, 0.8]	-3.5	(2.3)	[-8.0, 0.9]	-1.6	(2.1)	[-5.8, 2.6]
Militarist	-0.8	(2.4)	[-5.4, 3.8]	-0.6	(2.4)	[-5.3, 4.1]	0.3	(2.3)	[-4.2, 4.8]
Gay person	3.4	(1.4)	[0.6, 6.2]	2.6	(1.3)	[0.0, 5.2]	2.4	(1.7)	[-0.9, 5.8]
Islamic religious leader	-0.6	(2.4)	[-5.2, 4.1]	-0.0	(2.2)	[-4.4, 4.3]	-1.7	(2.4)	[-6.4, 2.9]
With supplemental adjustment for balance on mode, education, and party identification:									
Atheist	-1.1	(2.0)	[-4.9, 2.8]	-2.1	(2.2)	[-6.5, 2.2]	0.2	(1.8)	[-3.3, 3.7]
Racist	-2.1	(2.3)	[-6.6, 2.4]	-2.9	(2.2)	[-7.3, 1.5]	2.1	(2.3)	[-2.5, 6.6]
Communist	-3.5	(2.2)	[-7.8, 0.7]	-4.5	(2.2)	[-8.8, -0.2]	-2.1	(2.1)	[-6.1, 2.0]
Militarist	-0.4	(2.3)	[-5.0, 4.1]	-0.3	(2.4)	[-5.0, 4.4]	-0.3	(2.3)	[-4.8, 4.1]
Gay person	3.3	(1.4)	[0.5, 6.1]	2.7	(1.3)	[0.1, 5.3]	2.5	(1.7)	[-0.8, 5.7]
Islamic religious leader	0.5	(2.3)	[-3.9, 5.0]	0.4	(2.2)	[-3.9, 4.7]	-1.4	(2.3)	[-6.0, 3.1]

Notes: The *N* varies between 2,622 and 2,663 because of the level of non-response varies by outcome.

For the first panel of each table, the difference is presented without any adjustment or modeling of any type, other than the application of the post-stratification weights. For the second panel, adjustments are performed for respondent's education, party identification, and the mode of survey administration (including, for 2022, the mode sequence). Because form randomization was effective, the adjustments for covariates in the second panel of each table have little or no patterned consequences for the treatment effect estimates. As expected, the estimated standard errors are smaller because of the reduction of estimated residual variance.

Table 5. Experimental Differences in Percent Tolerant, 2022

Reference individual	Speech in your community			Teach in college			Book in public library		
	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.
Analyzed as a classical experiment, relying solely on randomization to achieve balance:									
Atheist	< 0.1	(2.8)	[-5.5, 5.5]	2.1	(3.3)	[-4.5, 8.7]	1.3	(2.7)	[-4.0, 6.6]
Racist	-4.6	(3.9)	[-12.3, 3.2]	0.4	(3.4)	[-6.4, 7.2]	-0.8	(3.4)	[-7.6, 6.0]
Communist	0.4	(3.8)	[-7.2, 8.0]	-0.7	(3.6)	[-7.9, 6.4]	1.4	(2.4)	[-3.4, 6.2]
Islamic religious leader	-6.3	(3.9)	[-14.1, 1.5]	-2.3	(3.0)	[-8.3, 3.7]	-5.7	(3.6)	[-12.8, 1.4]
With supplemental adjustment for balance on mode, education, and party identification:									
Atheist	-0.0	(2.7)	[-5.5, 5.5]	1.8	(3.2)	[-4.5, 8.2]	0.2	(2.6)	[-4.9, 5.4]
Racist	-4.4	(3.9)	[-12.1, 3.2]	0.3	(3.5)	[-6.6, 7.2]	-1.4	(3.3)	[-8.1, 5.2]
Communist	0.5	(3.5)	[-6.6, 7.5]	-0.3	(3.5)	[-7.3, 6.6]	0.9	(2.4)	[-3.8, 5.6]
Islamic religious leader	-6.5	(3.8)	[-14.0, 1.0]	-2.5	(3.0)	[-8.4, 3.4]	-6.4	(3.4)	[-13.1, 0.3]

Notes: The *N* varies between 2,211 and 2,306 because of the level of non-response varies by outcome.

Overall, the estimated treatment effects are small, both substantively and with respect to their standard errors. No clear or consistent pattern is present across the two years of the experiment, even though a few point estimates have permissive 95% confidence intervals that do exclude zero.

Consider the items for the gay person. A small amount of evidence suggests that the switch from a gender-specific male homosexual to a gender-nonspecific gay person produced a slight increase in tolerance in 2021. However, the three items were dropped from the GSS core before the 2022 survey was fielded in order to allocate space for new items in other domains. And, as a result, we have less information to judge whether this evidence from 2021 might be a chance result produced by routine sampling error in 2021. And, therefore, it is possible it would have generated a pattern in a second fielding in 2022 without similar suggestive evidence. Indeed, this is what is shown for both the communist and the Islamic religious leader. For the communist, a possibly meaningful difference was also present for 2021, but then the evidence disappeared for 2022. For the Islamic religious leader, no evidence was present in 2021, but then suggestive evidence emerged in 2022.

CONCLUSIONS

The gender-neutral wording experiment from 2022 is currently in the field for the 2024 GSS. Barring any unexpected results when the 2024 data become available for analysis, the case for retiring the gender-neutral wording experiment will be strong. In that case, the gender-neutral wordings should become the standard wordings for their respective items beginning with the 2026 GSS.

APPENDIX

Additional Experimental Results for Other Gender-Neutral Wording Changes

Table A1 presents experimental results for gender-neutral wording changes for five additional questions, using the same modeling strategy as for the free expression items in the main text of this report. The wording changes for these additional items are summarized below the table.

Table A1. Experimental Differences in Percent Agree for Additional Variables with Gender-Neutral Wording Changes

Reference individual	2021			2022		
	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.	Perc.	s.e.	95% c.i.
Analyzed as a classical experiment, relying solely on randomization to achieve balance:						
LETDIE1	1.0	(2.2)	[-3.3, 5.4]	2.0	(3.0)	[-4.1, 8.1]
POLHITOK	0.9	(2.4)	[-3.8, 5.5]	-2.2	(2.6)	[-7.4, 3.0]
POLABUSE	2.0	(1.5)	[-1.0, 4.9]	2.1	(2.0)	[-1.9, 6.0]
POLATTAK	-1.7	(2.1)	[-5.8, 2.3]	3.0	(2.2)	[-1.5, 7.4]
RACOPEN				-3.1	(2.6)	[-8.3, 2.1]
With supplemental adjustment for balance on mode, education, and party identification:						
LETDIE1	0.4	(2.2)	[-3.9, 4.7]	2.6	(3.0)	[-3.4, 8.6]
POLHITOK	0.5	(2.3)	[-4.0, 5.0]	-2.3	(2.6)	[-7.5, 3.0]
POLABUSE	1.9	(1.5)	[-0.9, 4.8]	1.7	(1.8)	[-1.9, 5.3]
POLATTAK	-1.4	(2.0)	[-5.5, 2.6]	2.8	(2.2)	[-1.6, 7.1]
RACOPEN				-2.9	(2.6)	[-8.0, 2.2]

Notes: The N varies between 2,647 and 2,672 in 2021 and between 1,741 and 2,351 in 2022 because the level of non-response varies by outcome. In addition, the model with supplemental adjustment for RACOPEN could not be fit with an adjustment for mode because of perfect predictions. Thus, the result in the final row of the table is adjusted only for education and party identification.

The wording differences for the rows of Table A1 are:

LETDIE1

Form X:

When a person has a disease that cannot be cured, do you think doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life by some painless means if the patient and his family request it?

Form Y:

When a person has a disease that cannot be cured, do you think doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life by some painless means if the patient and the patient's family request it?

POLHITOK

Form X:

Are there any situations you can imagine in which you would approve of a policeman striking an adult male citizen?

Form Y:

Are there any situations you can imagine in which you would approve of a police officer striking an adult male citizen?

POLABUSE

Form X:

Would you approve if the citizen had said vulgar and obscene things to the policeman?

Form Y:

Would you approve if the citizen had said vulgar and obscene things to the police officer?

POLATTAK

Form X:

Would you approve if the citizen was attacking the policeman with his fists?

Form Y:

Would you approve if the citizen was attacking the police officer with his fists?

RACOPEN (after FILL is set to "Whites" for self-identified black respondents and "Blacks" for all other respondents); change only implemented in 2022 because the FILL value was not made available in 2021

Form X:

Suppose there is a community-wide vote on the general housing issue. There are two possible laws to vote on:

One law says that a homeowner can decide for himself whom to sell his house to, even if he prefers not to sell to {FILL}. The second law says that a homeowner cannot refuse to sell to someone because of their race or color.

Which law would you vote for?

Form Y:

Suppose there is a community-wide vote on the general housing issue. There are two possible laws to vote on:

One law says that a homeowner can decide whom to sell their house to, even if that homeowner prefers not to sell to {FILL}. The second law says that a homeowner cannot refuse to sell to someone because of their race or color.

Which law would you vote for?

One final non-attitude item required a small change:

FAMDIF16 (only for respondents who indicated they were not living with both parents at age 16)

Form X:

Which of the following best describes your situation?

- One or both parents died
- Parents divorced or separated
- Father absent in armed forces
- One or both parents in institution

Form Y:

Which of the following best describes your situation?

- One or both parents died
- Parents divorced or separated
- Parent absent in armed forces
- One or both parents in institution

This last item is a genuine substantive change that applies to only a few individuals in each year. As a result, it is not evaluated as a wording experiment in this appendix.

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