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Beyond 'Don't Know': Increasing Answer Rates in Youth Political Surveys
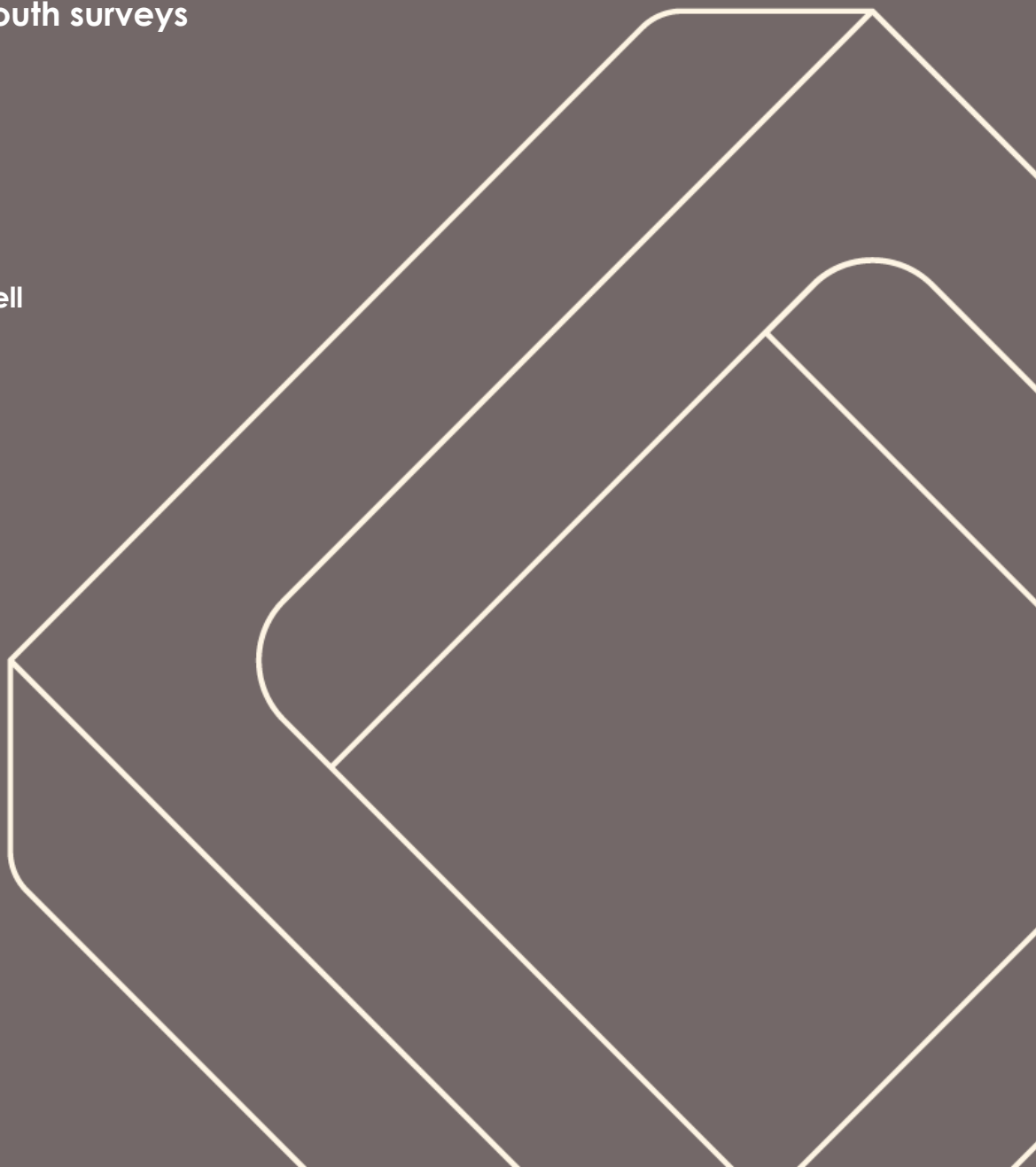
Practical guidelines based on insights from three German youth surveys

Research Brief

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August 2025

Summary

Purpose

Surveying young people about political and societal issues often reveals a gap: many have limited exposure to complex systemic topics, which can lead to higher item nonresponse, especially for abstract or analytically demanding questions. To better understand and reduce this problem, we analysed item-level data from three large CAWI studies with a total of over 7,000 young German-speaking respondents between the ages of 14 and 30.

Approach

We coded each item according to three core content features (political content, experiential distance, judgement type) and structural features (word count and position in the questionnaire) and linked all item metadata to respondent characteristics (age, gender, education, political interest/self-efficacy) in a multilevel logistic regression predicting nonresponse.

Key Findings

- **Political content** generally leads to higher nonresponse than non-political items — especially for respondents with low political interest or self-efficacy.

- **Experiential distance** matters: Items far removed from everyday experience and more related to abstract or systemic aspects often increase nonresponse, but the effect can vary depending on context and item type.

- **Judgement type** matters: Analytical items requiring causal reasoning or evaluation are harder for young respondents than normative items expressing values or preferences.

- **Contextual factors** (item position, length) and respondent characteristics (education, political interest, self-efficacy) can amplify these effects.

Implications for Item Design

1) **Reduce experiential distance – when possible.** Anchor abstract topics in concrete experiences. Link political or systemic issues to everyday examples (e.g., elections, public services) to make them easier to relate to. Use multiple concrete items instead of one abstract measure for key constructs but balance against survey length to avoid fatigue.

2) **Reconsider analytical requirements.** Clarify whether you are asking for preferences/values or factual analysis and make that explicit in the wording. Simplify complex causal or responsibility-attribution items or break them into smaller parts. Use analytical items only when such reasoning is essential, and expect higher nonresponse among younger or less confident respondents.

3) **Build progression carefully.** Start with accessible items to engage respondents, then introduce more complex ones while attention is still high. Avoid placing the most demanding items at the very end, as fatigue amplifies nonresponse for these questions.

Background and purpose

The Evaluation & Behavioural Research Team at Verian Germany regularly surveys young people for ministries, foundations, and other public clients. Experience from both qualitative and quantitative research pointed to a recurring problem: Many young respondents struggle to answer questions on complex political or systemic topics as these seem far removed from their everyday experience or require analytical judgements they are not confident to make. This might result in higher nonresponse rates, particularly among subgroups with lower political interest or self-efficacy.

Therefore, we sought empirical answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: Are political items indeed more challenging for young people than non-political ones?

RQ2: Which item features make political items especially challenging for young respondents?

RQ3: What role do respondent characteristics and contextual factors play?

Our goal was to derive practical guidelines for crafting questions that are easier to answer — particularly for younger and less politically engaged respondents — without sacrificing content validity.

Data and methodology

We analysed item-level data from three representative CAWI surveys on political and social topics:

Study and main topic	Sample	N	Age range	Year
1: *The future? Ask the youth! 2023* (Environment, climate change & future directions)	Online access panel	1,150	14–22	2024
2: *GenNow – Young engagement for social change* (Drivers and barriers for political engagement)	Online access panel	2,532	16–30	2024
3: *Generation Germany* (justice issues regarding gender, climate, religion and trust in democracy)	Online access panel & convenience sample	3,822	16–24	2024

We applied the same methodological approach across all three studies:

1) **Selection of relevant items:** We focussed on items about attitudes or behaviour and excluded sociodemographic items that could evoke nonresponse due to other processes (e.g., privacy concerns for household income) than those of interest.

2) **Classification of item content:** In a first step, we instructed an LLM to classify all selected items based on the following question: "Does this item relate to political attitudes or behaviour or not?" Next, we analysed the item content of all political items in an exploratory manner. We

identified two distinguishable content features that were present across all three studies and could be related to concepts in the literature on survey research and item-nonresponse:

    a. Experiential Distance: Our items differed in the degree they are related to personal relevance and everyday experiences as compared to abstract, institutional, or systemic aspects. Similar differentiations have been introduced in the literature on survey research with concept of issue proximity (Zaller & Feldman, 1992) or the distinction of concrete vs. abstract items (Krosnick, 1991; Tourangeau et al., 2000).

    b. Judgement Type: Our items differed in the degree that they required judgments related to personal values, identity-based or intuitive attitudes as opposed to evaluation, factual understanding or attribution of political responsibilities. Similar differentiations have been introduced with attitudinal vs. factual knowledge items (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) opinion vs. judgement tasks (Bishop et al., 1996).

The LLM classified all political items on the two dimensions. For experiential distance, items were classified in "low", "mid" or "high" distance, for judgement type, items were classified as either "normative" or "analytical" (for examples, see Figure 2)

3) Coding of structural item features: For each item, we identified the total word count (question stem + answer categories) and the position of the item block in the questionnaire (item order within blocks was usually randomized) as control or potential moderating variables.

We merged the above-described item meta data with the survey data in long format (item level). This data processing procedure allowed us to model the likelihood of item nonresponse as a function of item content features, the survey context (item position in the questionnaire, word count), respondent characteristics (gender, age, education, political interest/self-efficacy) and the interaction of these variables. To do so, we calculated multilevel logistic regression models, accounting for the nonresponse scores for multiple items (level-1-units) being dependent on the same respondent (level-2-units).

Figure 2: Coding examples for the analysed item features

Item feature		Coding example	Expected effect on item nonresponse
Political content	Yes	„I think it is good that the EU exists."	Political content increases nonresponse
	No	"I can rely on my skills in difficult situations."	
Experiential distance	Low	"I have taken part in demonstrations or assemblies."	Experiential distance increases nonresponse
	Mid	"Our local politicians have a connection to the people they represent."	
	High	"Overall, democracy in Germany works well."	
Judgement type	Normative	"It makes me proud that young people in particular are strongly committed to climate protection."	Analytical judgments lead to more nonresponse
	Analytical	"More environmental and climate protection in housing construction leads to higher rents."	

Results – what drives item nonresponse?

Political items evoke higher nonresponse compared to non-political items

Across all three studies, political items consistently triggered more nonresponse than non-political ones — even after controlling for respondent characteristics and item length/position. In the most complex questionnaire (Study 1), the odds of nonresponse to political items were more than three times higher than for non-political ones. This effect was strongest among respondents with low political interest or low self-efficacy. Interestingly, *age* itself did not explain these differences within the young sample: interest and confidence mattered more.

Experiential distance and judgement type are substantive drivers of nonresponse

When looking at differences in item nonresponse within political items, experiential distance and judgement type emerged as key drivers:

- **Experiential distance** – Items dealing with abstract, systemic topics (e.g., *"Overall, democracy in Germany works well")* generally had higher nonresponse than those tied to concrete behaviours (e.g., *"I have taken part in demonstrations")*. In Study 1, *high-distance items* had about 1.5 times the nonresponse odds of low-distance items. In the other two studies, the pattern was reversed: very concrete items sometimes led to *more* nonresponse, possibly because respondents more easily recognised when they lacked the necessary experience and thus used the "don't know" option intentionally.

- **Judgement type** – Items requiring analytical judgements, such as cause–effect relationships or responsibility attribution (e.g., *"More environmental and climate protection in housing construction leads to higher rents.")* were harder to answer than those tapping into values or preferences (e.g., *"It makes me proud that young people in particular are strongly committed to climate protection.")*. In Study 1, analytical items were three times more likely to get no answer than normative ones; in Study 2, the effect was smaller but still significant. Only in Study 3, with only a small base for analytical items (4 items), no robust difference emerged.

Amplifying factors:

- **Contextual:** In Study 1, the nonresponse gap for high-distance items widened when they appeared late in the questionnaire — suggesting that fatigue further reduces willingness to process difficult questions.

- **Respondent characteristics:** Lower education and feelings of self-efficacy amplified the difficulty of analytical items (Study 2). In Study 1, politically interested youth were *more* likely to skip analytical items — perhaps because they recognised their complexity and refrained from giving oversimplified answers.

Takeaway:
Political items with high experiential distance or analytical demands are most at risk of nonresponse — particularly among less politically engaged respondents, or when placed late in a survey. But even highly interested youth may avoid analytical questions if they perceive them as too complex or ambiguous.

Implications – how to reduce item nonresponse in political surveys with youth?

Our findings highlight two design levers – *experiential distance* and *judgement type* – that can be adjusted to make political questions easier to answer for young respondents.

1. Reduce experiential distance – when possible

- **Anchor abstract topics in concrete experiences.** Link political or systemic issues to everyday examples (e.g., elections, public services) to make them easier to relate to.

- **Create vivid, concrete scenarios** to embed questions about experiences or topics that young people have not yet encountered.

- **Use multiple concrete items instead of one abstract measure** when a key construct is critical. This can improve answerability – but balance against overall survey length to avoid fatigue.

2. Reconsider analytical judgement demands

- **Clarify intent.** If the aim is to capture preferences or values rather than factual analysis, make it explicit in wording ("I would prefer…", "It is important to me that…"). Instructions emphasizing that a response is desired even if the respondent is not entirely sure can further reduce the inhibition to respond.

- **Break down questions about causality or attribution of responsibility into smaller parts**. This can prevent overwhelming respondents with less knowledge or appearing overly simplified to knowledgeable respondents when the topic is complex.

- **Use analytical items strategically.** Reserve them for situations where measuring knowledge or analytical reasoning is essential and expect higher nonresponse rates among younger and less confident respondents.

3. Design for broad accessibility

- **Balance cognitive demands.** Combine easier, concrete items with a limited number of more abstract or analytical items to ensure that all respondents, regardless of prior knowledge, can meaningfully engage with the survey.

- **Offer cognitive entry points.** Use short introductions, examples, or definitions to bring all respondents to a shared minimum level of understanding before answering complex items.

- **Build progression carefully.** Start with accessible items to engage respondents and then introduce more complex questions while attention and motivation are still high. Avoid placing the most demanding items at the very end, as fatigue amplifies nonresponse for these questions.

Bottom line
Design political questions with *relevance*, *clarity*, and *cognitive load* in mind. Reducing experiential distance and rethinking analytical barriers can meaningfully lower nonresponse rates — without sacrificing the ability to measure the constructs you care about.

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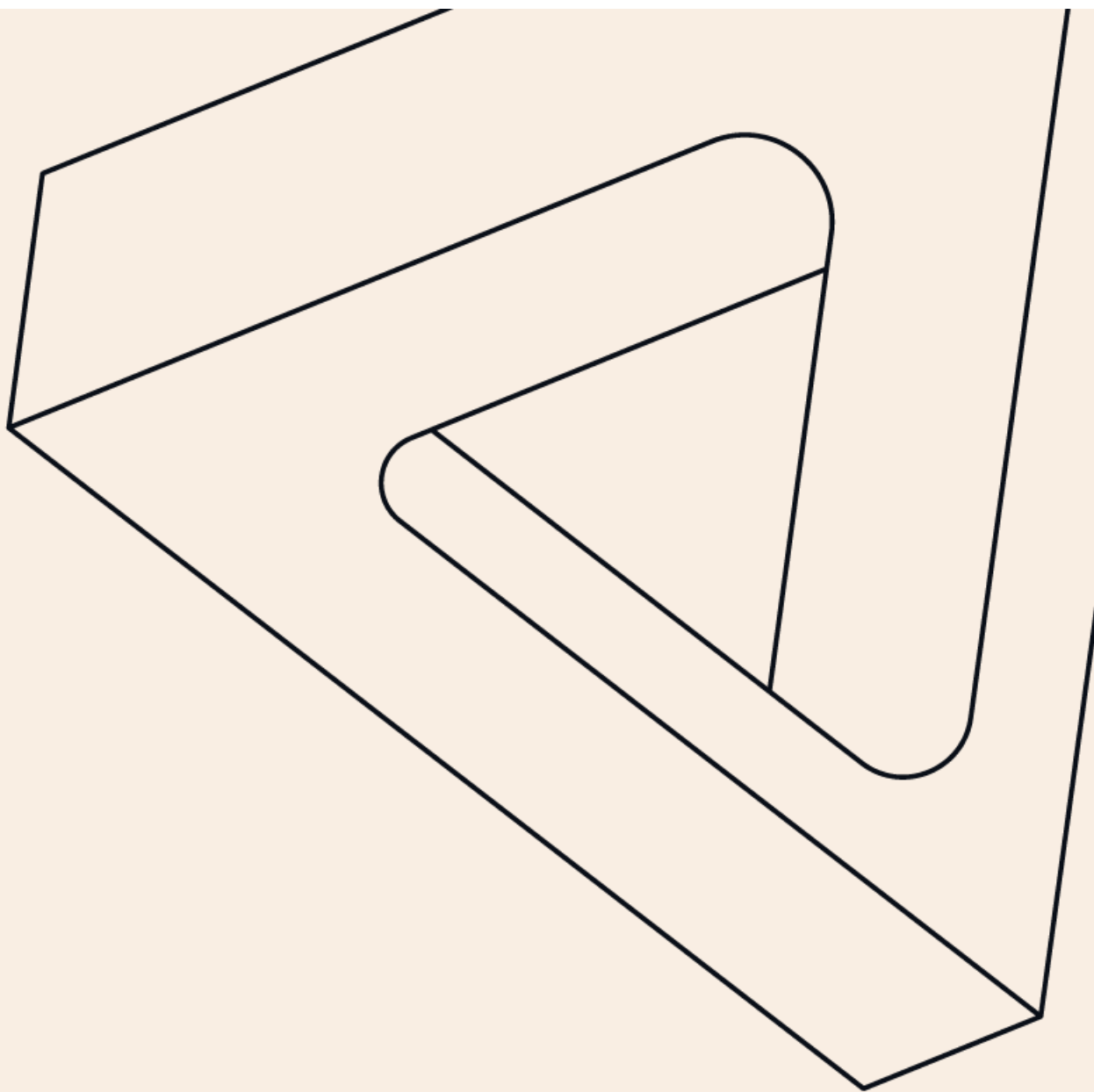Krosnick, J. A. (1991). Response strategies for coping with the cognitive demands of attitude measures in surveys. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 5*(3), 213–236. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.2350050305

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