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Title
Do we know what to do with "Don't know"?

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

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Agenda

- Background: why investigate this issue?

- Experiment design

- Experiment results

- Conclusions, implications and next steps

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Why investigate this issue?

- Long-standing debates on inclusion and presentation of DK codes

- 'Standard' approach for most interviewer-administered surveys: DK codes available to interviewers but not offered to respondents

- Growth of online self-completion surveys poses new challenges:

  - Consistency between modes

  - Consistency of trend measurement

  - Risk of inflated DK rates

  - Risk of capturing 'non-attitudes' if DK codes not initially offered

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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 or an existing survey moving online

  - Part of a mixed-mode design

- Attempts to replicate existing interviewer administered approach through a 'second screen' where DK codes appear if respondent attempts to move on without selecting a response

  - This approach taken for Understanding Society survey in UK

  - However, usability testing has uncovered possible issues

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Key research questions

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

Does this vary between different types of question?

Is there any impact on the distribution of 'substantive' responses?

Does making DK codes less visible result in more 'non-attitudes'?

Experiment design (1)

- Experiment run on wave 11 of Understanding Society Innovation Panel (IP11) in UK

- Longitudinal study with a mixed-mode design (mostly CAPI and CAWI)

- Tested three different treatments of DK responses:

  1. 'Hidden DK': where DK appears if respondent attempts to move on without selecting a response

  2. 'Prompted DK': As 1, but with a prompt on each screen for what to do if don't know or don't want to answer

  3. 'Offered DK': DK code included as part of main list (always visible)

- Respondents randomly allocated to one of the three groups; same allocation for all questions; c. 420 respondents in each group (CAWI only)

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1. 'Hidden DK'

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

<   >

Understanding Society

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'

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'

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 (2)

- Experiment run in some of self-completion sections of questionnaire in CAPI and CAWI interviews

- Analysis in this paper focuses solely on CAWI interviews

- Focus on two types of questions:

  1. 24 self-assessed health measures

  2. Two attitudinal questions on topics where salience expected to be low (views on nuclear energy and trust in the United Nations)

- Follow-up knowledge questions asked of attitudinal questions; where response suggested possible contradiction, open clarification question asked

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

Blue dots = self-assessed heath questions

Higher DK rate for Group 3 than Group 1 at 11 of 24 self-assessed health measures (p ≤ 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: 430; Prompted DK: 429; Offered DK: 440

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

Blue dots = self-assessed heath questions

Red dots = attitudinal questions on nuclear energy / UN
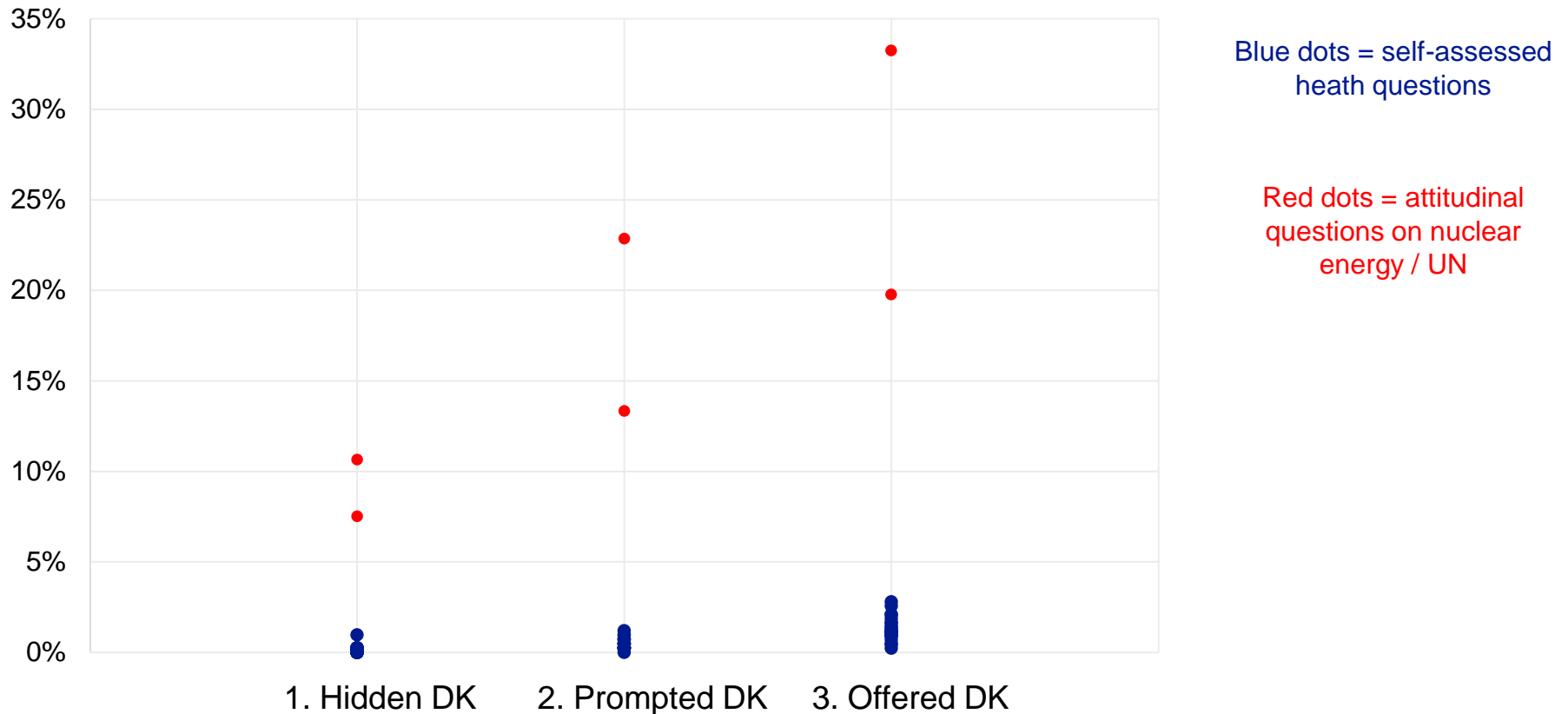
Bases: Hidden DK: 430; Prompted DK: 429; Offered DK: 440

Large difference in DK rates for low-salience attitudinal questions between three groups

Legend:
- ■ 1. Hidden DK
- ■ 2. Prompted DK
- ■ 3. Offered DK

Views on nuclear energy (benefits vs. risks):
- 11%
- 23%
- 33%

Trust in United Nations:
- 8%
- 13%
- 20%

Bases: Hidden DK: 430; Prompted DK: 429; Offered DK: 440

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Where DK code hidden, greater numbers select mid-point for nuclear energy question; also some other differences

Legend:
- **Risks far outweight benefits** (dark red)
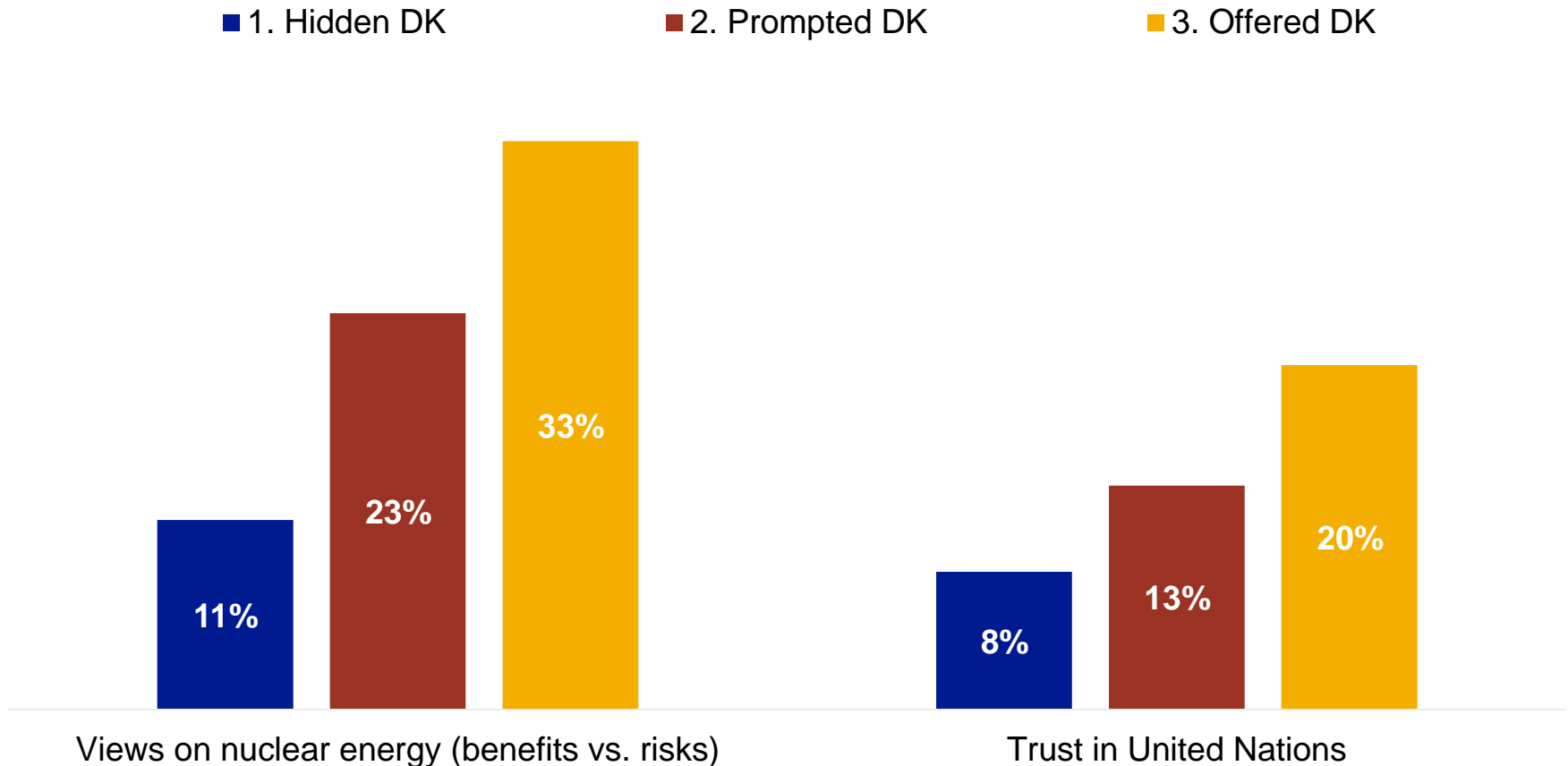- **Risks slights outweight benefits** (orange)
- **About same** (yellow)
- **Benefits slightly outweigh risks** (light green)
- **Benefits far outweigh risks** (green)

1. Hidden DK
- 12%
- 14%
- 29%
- 23%
- 21%

2. Prompted DK
- 11%
- 11%
- 24%
- 28%
- 25%

3. Offered DK
- 12%
- 12%
- 23%
- 22%
- 31%
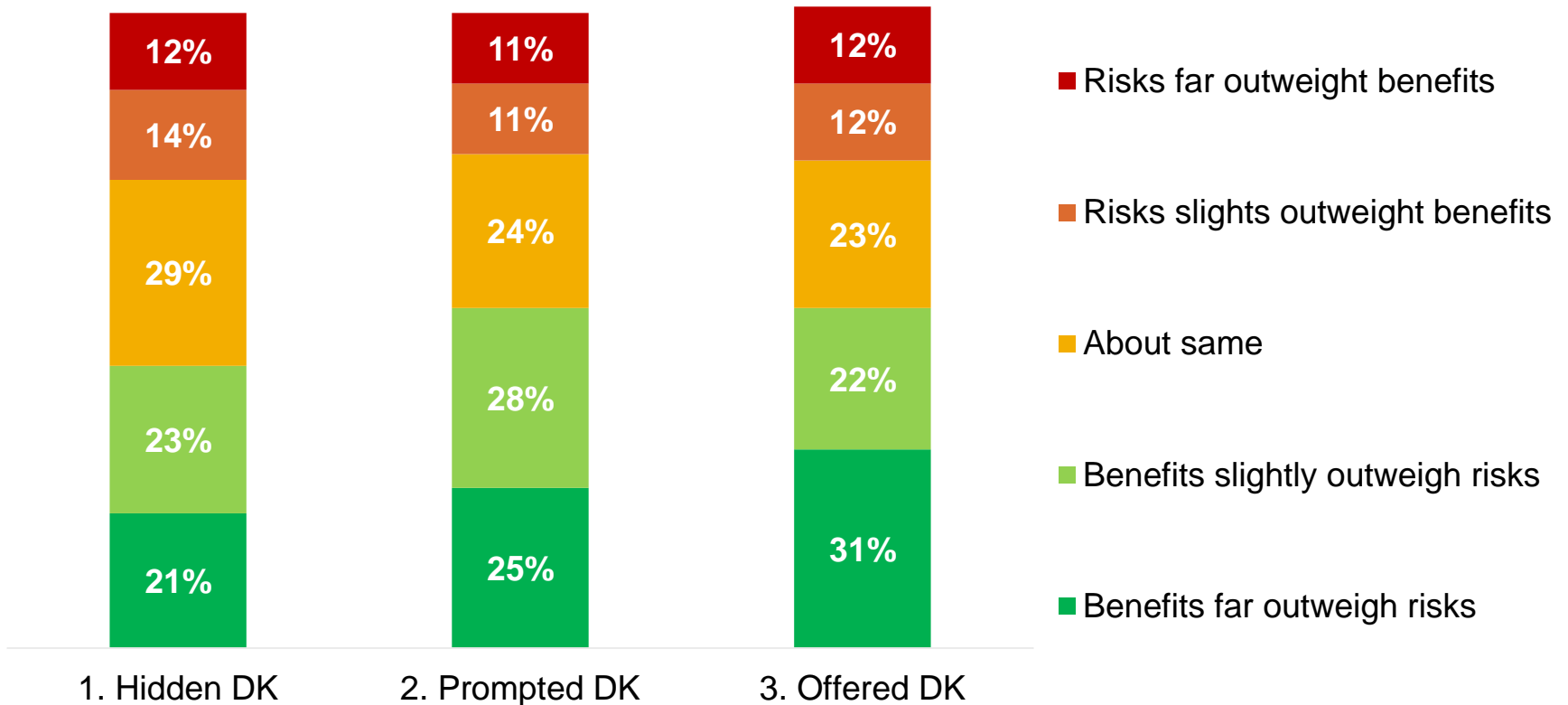
Bases: Hidden DK: 355; Prompted DK: 303; Offered DK: 269

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Smaller difference at midpoint for trust in UN question and distribution fairly similar between three groups

Trust in the United Nations
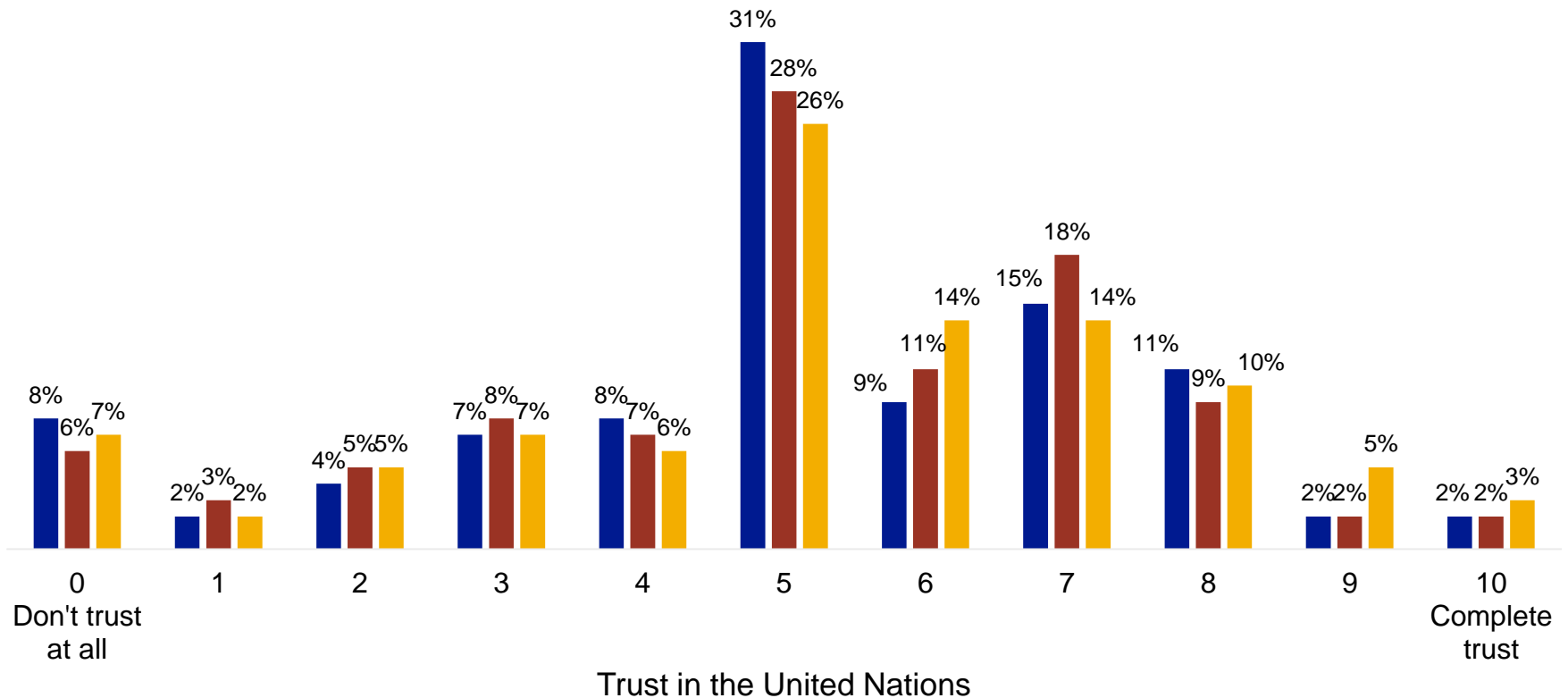
Bases: Hidden DK: 374; Prompted DK: 349; Offered DK: 334

We then asked respondents how much they knew about nuclear energy and the United Nations…

Knowledge about nuclear energy
- A lot: 3%
- A fair amount: 25%
- Not very much: 52%
- Nothing at all: 18%

Knowledge about the United Nations
- A lot: 1%
- A fair amount: 32%
- Not very much: 54%
- Nothing at all: 11%

Legend:
- ■ A lot
- ■ A fair amount
- ■ Not very much
- ■ Nothing at all
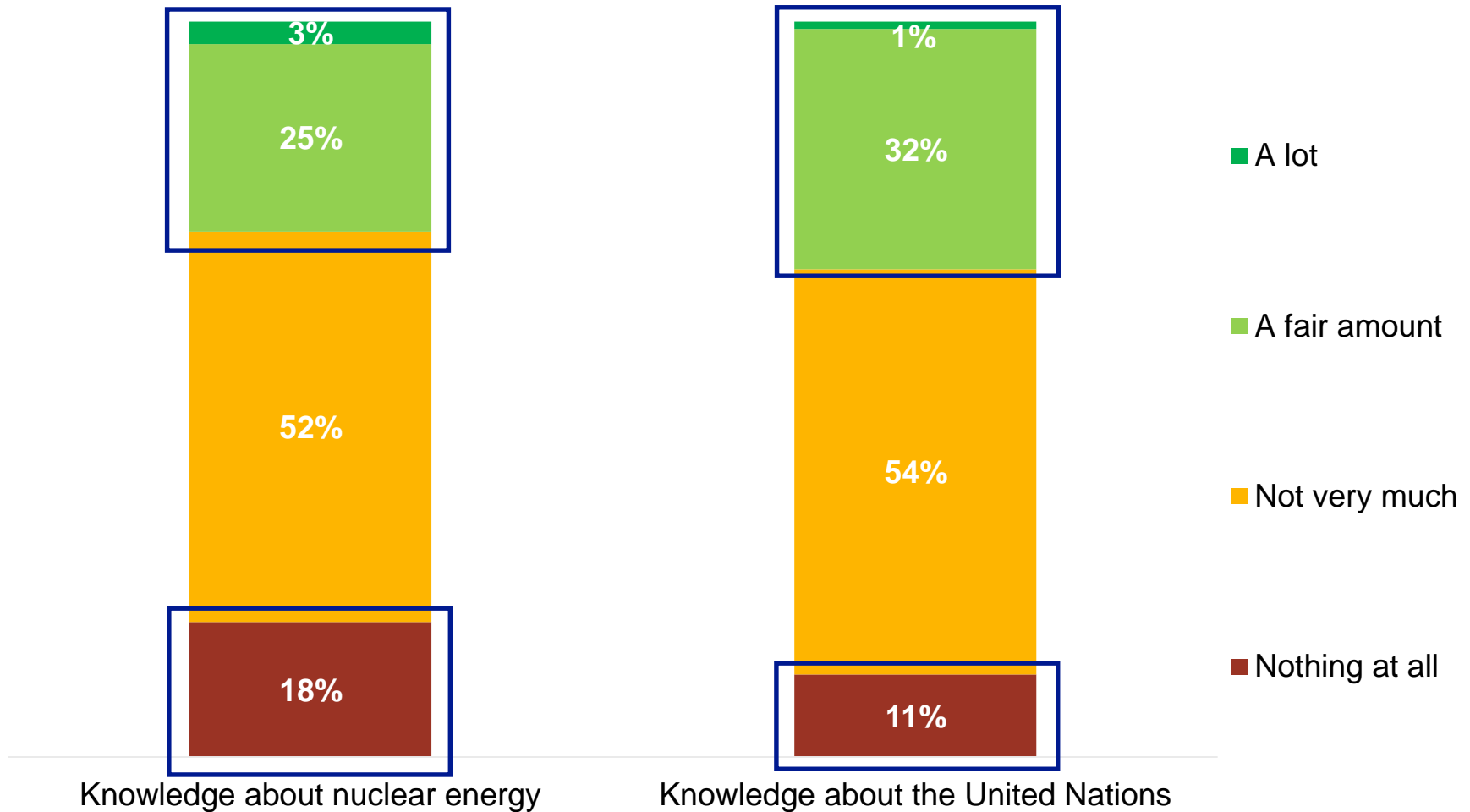
Base: 1,299 (both questions)

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Those who know 'nothing at all' about subjects more likely to give a (non-DK) response where DK code hidden

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

57% **34%** **16%**

% of those who know 'nothing at all' on nuclear energy giving (non-DK) response

61% **49%** **31%**

% of those who know 'nothing at all' on the United Nations giving (non-DK) response
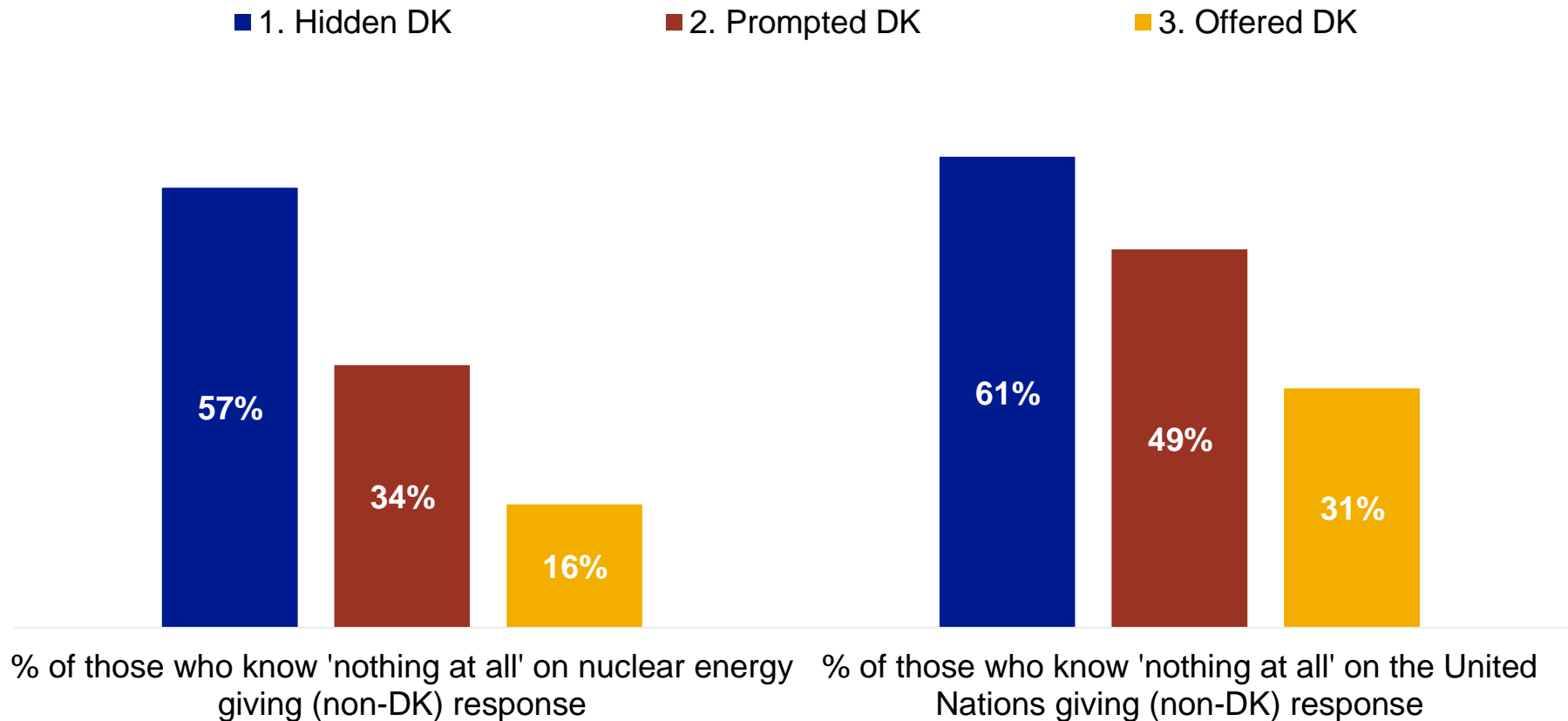
Bases: Hidden DK: 70; Prompted DK: 74; Offered DK: 79

Bases: Hidden DK: 44; Prompted DK: 51; Offered DK: 45

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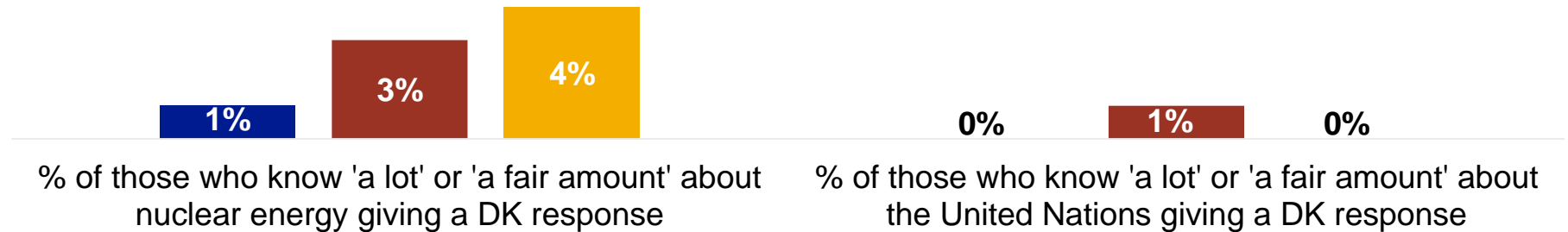# Very few who know 'a lot' or 'a fair amount' about topics give DK response at attitudinal questions

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

1%   **3%**   **4%**

% of those who know 'a lot' or 'a fair amount' about nuclear energy giving a DK response

0%   **1%**   **0%**

% of those who know 'a lot' or 'a fair amount' about the United Nations giving a DK response

Bases: Hidden DK: 133; Prompted DK: 116; Offered DK: 111

Bases: Hidden DK: 133; Prompted DK: 145; Offered DK: 138

Some evidence that respondents unaware of option to say 'Don't know' when DK codes hidden (groups 1 and 2)

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 (c. 60 for each topic)

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

c. 20% in 'Hidden DK' and 'Prompted DK' groups 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

- Clear evidence that varying treatment of DK codes can impact on DK rates

- But difference does not hold for all questions – largest differences for low-salience attitudinal questions

- Results suggest there may be some impact on overall response distribution based on DK treatment – more midpoint responses for 'Hidden DK' treatment

- Some evidence that hiding DK codes can result in the reporting of 'non-attitudes' for low salience topics

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Implications / next steps

- Experiment results – and usability testing – point to issues with 'hiding' DK codes in attempt to replicate interviewer surveys

- Should consider whether this is the best approach and whether it is better to offer DK as standard for all questions:

  - For many questions, unlikely to make a big difference to DK rates

  - For some questions (low salience attitudes) bigger difference expected, but may better reflect levels of knowledge

  - But still need to consider different surveys (e.g. impact on time series)

- Future work:

  - Apply experiment across a full questionnaire

  - Test on different types of surveys

Thank you!

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