



Jonathan Fox  
The Yehuda Avner Professor of Religion and Politics  
Department of Political Studies  
Bar Ilan University

Jonathan.Fox@biu.ac.il

יונתן פאקס  
פרופסור לדת ומדינה ע"ש יהודה אבנר  
מחלקת מדעי המדינה  
אוניברסיטת בר-אילן  
+972-3-531-8011



## Response to Errol Henderson

I read Henderson’s response letter admit to being a bit confused. While in one brief note he admits to having been “mistaken” about the RAS data, his wording in most of the letter seems to indicate that I did, in fact collect data from 1989 or in some manner collected data that in his words “is presumed to be 1990 but may derive from 1989 or even earlier calls into question *all of his analyses and publications* that rely on RAS2 and RAS3.” This is a serious charge that is based entirely on what is clearly a misunderstanding by Henderson.

Before I go into detail on why I feel this statement is mistaken, let me repeat, RAS has never collected pre 1990 data. I will add to this, nor is any of our 1990 data (or post-1990 data) based on pre-1990 observations. I discuss this in some detail below.

But first, let me clear up what I believe happened based on Maoz and Henderson’s responses. Both Henderson and Maoz in their responses refer to a series of variables marked 1990x. These variables are labeled “1990 or *earliest*” in the dataset itself.

Henderson in his letter repeatedly claims these variables are labeled “1990 or *earlier*.” This difference between “*earliest*” and “*earlier*” may seem trivial but based on Henderson’s letter it turns out to be quite important. Incidentally if anyone would like to check to see how the 1990x variables are labeled, I welcome them to look at any version of the RAS dataset or the listing of variables for RAS2 (<http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/RAS2012.asp>) and RAS3 ([http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Codebooks/RAS3COMP\\_CB.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Codebooks/RAS3COMP_CB.asp)). (These are different from the codebook which is available at [www.religionandstate.org](http://www.religionandstate.org).) Also, Maoz in his discussion of the 1990x variables correctly states “*earliest*” rather than “*earlier*” so this misapprehension seems to be limited to Henderson.

According to both Henderson’s and Maoz’s responses they interpreted this 1990x variable to mean earlier than 1990 which would include 1989. As best as I can tell from Henderson and Maoz’s response letters, this was done solely with reference to the label embedded in the dataset “1990 or *earliest*” and with no reference to any other RAS publication or documentation. I assume this to be the case since they cite no RAS publication or codebook in their responses with respect to this argument and focus entirely on this label which is embedded in the dataset.

Based on this, Henderson, despite my clear statements otherwise in my open letter, continues to argue that my 1990x variable really meant 1989 or earlier. Or at least he seems to. I will give Henderson the benefit of the doubt and assume he’s arguing it is an easy mistake to make, though, again, many of his statements such as the quote in the opening paragraph seem to indicate otherwise.

I honestly never anticipated that anyone could make such a mistake for at least five reasons.



- (1) In all my publications I'm very clear that the starting year for RAS is 1990. This includes all codebooks. Given this, it never occurred to me that someone who read the label "1990 or earliest" would think this referred to years not included in the timespan covered by the dataset.
- (2) I explain the meaning of this variable in several of my publications. For example, in my 2015 book, which is cited in Maoz Henderson's book including the portion quoted by Henderson in his response, which is also one of the places in their book that they claim the RAS data starts in 1989, I describe the nature of the 1990x variables as follows on pages 12 to 13: "countries were not coded if there was a year in which there was no government to code. This is because a working government is necessary for there to be a government religion policy. These cases include Afghanistan until 1992 , Bosnia until 1995 , and Iraq in 2002, when there was effectively no government. Thus, throughout this book I use terms such as '1990 (or the earliest available date)' and 'from the beginning of the study period.' This is meant to refer to the time period for all states from the first year of available data from each state until 2008." I do not see how anyone who read this could interpret this as meaning data from before 1990. I assume this means Maoz & Henderson either did not read this portion of my book, somehow misunderstood it, or forgot it.
- (3) Throughout the book when I make comparisons between 1990 and 2008 (the beginning and end of the timespan covered by RAS2 which was the version both used in that book and Maoz & Henderson's book) I use phrases like "the distribution of states based on these types of policies for 1990 (or the earliest year for which information is available) and 2008." This one happens to be from page 42 but sentences like this can be found throughout the book.
- (4) It never occurred to me anyone would interpret a variable which includes "1990x" in its variable name as being from 1989.
- (5) To my knowledge in the 20+ year history of the dataset, no one else has ever made this mistake.

So to be clear the data from RAS begins in 1990. There are no codings which rely on as Henderson puts it "observations from 1989 or prior." Obviously our research included the history of each state's religion policy since that is relevant to current policy, but the codings are based entirely on the situation in the country in the year marked by the variable. There is absolutely no conflation between the 1990x variables, or any other variables in the RAS dataset, with pre-1990 policy.

The only way someone could make this mistake would be to (1) ignore every piece of documentation in all RAS publications and codebooks and (2) grossly misinterpret or misread the meaning of the label "1990 or earliest." I'd also note, that if Maoz and



Henderson were in any way unsure or felt the documentation for the 1990x variables were unclear, they could have simply e-mailed and asked. They didn't.

All of that being said, as Maoz and Henderson did make this mistake. Based on this in retrospect I see that my documentation of my research is not as foolproof as I had previously thought and an occurrence I never in my wildest dreams anticipated occurred. In future iterations of RAS I will seek to be abundantly clear on the issue. As, to my knowledge, no one other than Maoz and Henderson ever made this mistake and I'm quite sure they won't get this wrong again in the future, I will likely make some adjustments to the RAS4 documentation whenever it comes out.

I'd also like to note that in most of Henderson's '1990x' discussion he seems to be arguing that I, in fact, conflated 1990 with 1989. However, he does once in passing admit that they made a mistake when he states "instead of addressing this ambiguity in his data, and noting that our inference was reasonable—even if *mistaken* given the ambiguity in Fox's coding rules, he attempts to turn this molehill into a mountain and attempts to declaim our broader critique of his findings using these data on the specific points in Figure 2.1 and then to generalize these to the findings in the entire book. This takes quite a bit of nerve." (I put the word *mistaken* in italics so the reader wouldn't miss it.)

Given this he seems to understand that my "open letter" argument is that flawed data cannot be relied upon, no matter how that flaw occurred. However, like Maoz, he does not think that using this flawed data in the rest of the book is a big deal based, so far as I can tell, mostly on that Maoz in his response to my open letter used the correct data and performed a small proportion of these tests from the book and the results did not change. As I state in my response to Maoz's letter, this is a good start but there will be a question mark on any result not retested so I recommend retesting all of them.

Henderson also defies me to show him in the book where they say they use the 1989 data in all the tests on the book. In my open letter I stated it was unclear what they did because: "on page 169 when describing the data they use in the book's main analyses they state that the RAS2 dataset which they use in their analyses 'covers most states during the period 1988–2008.' (Maoz in his e-mail states this is a typo and it should be 1989–2008). However in the table on page 195 they state they use data from RAS2 from 1990–2010." They also say the data covers 1989–2008 on page 55, as I note in the open letter. As Maoz did feel a need to retest at least one element of the book's main analysis (in addition to what they consider their replication of my work). I take that to mean that the flawed data was used throughout the book. If it wasn't, why not just say so?

Henderson seems to feel that if I want to refute their analysis I am required to run additional analyses to support my claim. As my claim is they use flawed data and both Maoz and Henderson (sort of) admit this to be true, I do not see the logic of this statement nor do I see how my failure to run some sort of statistical analysis constitutes a "flaw" in my argument.



Jonathan Fox  
 The Yehuda Avner Professor of Religion and Politics  
 Department of Political Studies  
 Bar Ilan University

יונתן פאקס  
 פרופסור לדת ומדינה ע"ש יהודה אבנר  
 מחלקת מדעי המדינה  
 אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

Jonathan.Fox@biu.ac.il

+972-3-531-8011



So again, my argument is a simple one: results based on data with this kind of flaw should not be considered reliable. This is true even if the flaw is due to an honest mistake, and I believe that this was a case of an honest mistake being made. As both Henderson and Maoz seem convinced that running their tests with the correct data will uphold their original results, I urge them to do exactly that. I have no interest in using their own data to try and disprove their results but I would assume they have an interest in using the corrected data to prove their contention that their original results based on the flawed data was correct. Whether they do so or not is up to them. I can only speak for myself but I will consider any result not retested using the corrected data to be unreliable.

Henderson at the end of his letter asks editors, among others, not to use me as a reviewer for his and Maoz’s future work due to my “bias” against them. He has no need. I do not feel I am biased against them but given that they seem to feel that I am, I agree to recuse myself in any case where I am aware they are the authors. I request that given their clear animosity to me, which I feel is obvious in their responses, that they agree to do the same with regard to their reviewing anything by me.

Jonathan Fox  
 May 10, 2020