

THE NEED FOR SURVEY REPORTING STANDARDS IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

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There is widespread recognition that survey research today faces significant methodological challenges. People are harder to reach and, when reached, they are less willing to answer questions. Survey results will be biased if those who do not respond are systematically different from those who do. Bias can also be introduced when some members of a study population are excluded, either intentionally or unintentionally, such as the Random Digit Dial telephone surveys that exclude households without landline telephones (i.e., cell phone-only households). At the same time, new technologies have made it less expensive to conduct a survey—especially using opt-in internet samples—so we now find the academic landscape dotted with more original surveys than ever before. While this explosion of data sources offers exciting potential for new research, too often these surveys are marred by less rigorous and less transparent methodological standards that have the potential to undermine any substantive conclusions.

In a world with more surveys but also more threats to survey methods, it has become more difficult—but also more important—to evaluate survey quality. Yet, I often hear the opposing argument that because all surveys today are flawed, we might as well do cheaper, opt-in web polls. Those in the internet polling business often justify their work by saying that media, political, or advocacy polls need not be held to the same standards as academic research. While that might well be the case, the unfortunate reality is that there are few academic survey quality standards, either. Indeed, media organizations are more likely than academic journals to have written survey-quality standards. The Associated Press, The New York Times, and ABC News, among others, have developed internal standards for judging whether or not they should report a survey. In political science, by contrast, journal readers and reviewers (and the scholars themselves) have

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little guidance in gauging whether or not they should trust the results of a survey. The absence of quality standards jeopardizes our ability to accurately measure the wants and needs of the American public and threatens the credibility of the entire survey enterprise.

What should we do? First, and foremost, we must increase methodological transparency. Although we have come to expect scholars to report sampling error (e.g., margin of error, standard errors), there are many other sources of errors in surveys—measurement error, nonresponse error, and coverage error, to name a few. Over the last several decades, survey methodologists have had significant success developing methods for measuring, understanding, and adjusting for these different sources of error. Yet too little of this knowledge has filtered to political scientists, and descriptions of survey methods often neglect basic aspects of the design that are essential for the assessment of survey quality, much less replication of the results. At a minimum, readers should have enough information about the survey-design and data-collection procedures to scrutinize how both sampling and nonsampling errors might influence the reported results. Readers should be able to determine whether a survey's design and implementation were appropriate for the research question and whether the survey's knowledge claims were warranted given the methods used. Towards this aim, we should develop a set of minimum survey quality standards in political science.

Second, we must advocate for high-quality surveys. While no survey is perfect, increased transparency will make it clear that not all survey methods are equal. There is an inevitable tradeoff between cost and quality, and scholarly work should resist the temptation to compromise survey accuracy. It is possible to get a large number of interviews on the internet for very little money, but the use of nonprobability samples comes at a clear cost to quality. The scientific basis of surveys—the fundamental ability to generalize beyond just the pool of people who answered the questions—rests on statistical theory. Without an appropriately designed probability-based sample, there is no well-grounded theoretical basis for making claims about representativeness or generalizability. Increased transparency and scrutiny in publication standards should help incentivize researchers to conduct higher-quality survey projects. But scholars must also make the case to foundations and government agencies that it is worthwhile to fund more expensive research. Quality standards will help make clear exactly why it is necessary.

Finally, political science should take the lead in advancing survey quality. Surveys are more than just a research tool for the discipline; as one of the key means by which the public's preferences are communicated to elected officials, surveys are an integral part of the political dynamics that we seek to explain. The scientific study of public opinion has been historically built in political science, so it is especially fitting that we take the lead in shaping

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the future of survey research methods. Towards that goal, we should be conducting more original research on survey quality. Scholars could and should incorporate in the design of new surveys a plan for collecting benchmarks on survey quality. It should become routine in political science, as it is in so many other social sciences, for new theoretical concepts to incorporate sound empiric design principles, with survey questions and other measures undergoing cognitive testing and other validity and reliability checks. On the bright side, the methodological challenges facing survey research create the opportunity for innovation. But this will require the sharing of knowledge and expertise with survey scholars across academic disciplines—sociology, psychology, health policy, education, and so on. Moreover, the nature of survey research means that much of the knowledge remains clinical, coming from practitioners in the commercial, nonprofit, and government sectors. The future of survey research requires bringing together scholars who are focused on survey methods, practitioners who conduct surveys and the organizations, and individual users who benefit from the methods, best practices, and results. The very first step is to establish a baseline of minimum quality standards, against which we can measure our eventual improvement.

Of possible related interest: Chapters 25, 35, 38, 57.

Suggested additional reading

- Biemer, Paul, and Lars Lyberg. *Introduction to Survey Quality*. New York: Wiley, 2003.
- Groves, R., Fowler, F., Couper, M., Lepkowski, J., Singer, E., and Tourangeau, R. *Survey Methodology*. New York: Wiley, 2004.
- Weisberg, Herbert F. *The Total Survey Error Approach: A Guide to the New Science of Survey Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.