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CONSEQUENCES OF REDUCING NONRESPONSE IN A NATIONAL TELEPHONE SURVEY

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Abstract Critics of public opinion polls often claim that methodological shortcuts taken to collect timely data produce biased results. This study compares two random digit dial national telephone surveys that used identical questionnaires but very different levels of effort: a “Standard” survey conducted over a 5-day period that used a sample of adults who were home when the interviewer called, and a “Rigorous” survey conducted over an 8-week period that used random selection from among all adult household members. Response rates, computed according to AAPOR guidelines, were 60.6 percent for the Rigorous and 36.0 percent for the Standard study. Nonetheless, the two surveys produced similar results. Across 91 comparisons, no difference exceeded 9 percentage points, and the average difference was about 2 percentage points. Most of the statistically significant differences were among demographic items. Very few significant differences were found on attention to media and engagement in politics, social trust and connectedness, and most social and political attitudes, including even those toward surveys.

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In extolling the virtues of the sample survey, Sidney Verba has written that "surveys produce just what democracy is supposed to produce—equal representation of all citizens. The sample survey is rigorously egalitarian; it is designed so that each citizen has an equal chance to participate and an equal voice when participating" (Verba 1996, p. 3). Verba acknowledges that the people interviewed in surveys are not truly random samples, but sees surveys as much closer to the egalitarian ideal than any other venue from which citizens can be heard.

Nevertheless, there is considerable skepticism about the representativeness of contemporary opinion polls. Such concerns range from the dismay expressed by scholars and practitioners regarding declining response rates, to fears by liberals that the poor and dispossessed are often "out of frame" and thus out of mind, to the pointed charge that "conservatives are more likely than others to refuse to respond to polls, particularly those polls taken by media outlets that conservatives consider biased" (Barone 1997).

From a methodological vantage point, it would not be surprising if respondents to media and political polls were unrepresentative because the need for timely results demands that the polls have very short data-collection periods. Short time spans not only make high response rates difficult to attain but are also partly responsible for the use of nonrandom within-household selection methods, such as choosing respondents from among those who are home when the interviewer calls. But although there are reasons to expect both low response rates and nonrandom selection methods to produce unrepresentative respondent pools, there is little scientific evidence on these issues.

It is well known, of course, that nonresponse error is a function of both the nonresponse rate and the difference between respondents and nonrespondents on the statistic of interest. High nonresponse rates can still yield low nonresponse errors (if the difference between respondents and nonrespondents is small), and low nonresponse rates can yield high nonresponse errors (if respondents and nonrespondents differ dramatically). Although 100 percent response rates obviously eliminate nonresponse error, it is not clear what reduction of error results from moving between other response rates, for example, moving from 50 to 70 percent or from 30 to 50 percent.

While there is evidence that those not responding to some election surveys are less interested in politics (Brehm 1993; Couper 1997) and that even high response rate surveys can systematically miss certain kinds of households (Groves and Couper 1998), methodologists have not yet developed theories that are capable of predicting when nonresponse rates imply nonresponse error and when they do not. One viewpoint assumes that efforts to increase response rates will gradually reduce nonresponse bias by bringing into the respondent pool more diverse groups of respondents, obtaining, as a function of the response rate, a progressively more balanced representation of the entire survey population. This implies that distributions of survey variables change as the response rate increases.

Another viewpoint assumes that there is a set of characteristics that affect the survey participation decision (e.g., topic, burden, sponsorship, interviewer behavior), and that persons for whom those attributes are not attractive will be nonrespondents. Thus as the response rate increases, the respondent pool is being increased by more of those persons located and contacted for whom the survey conditions are minimally acceptable. The rest remain nonrespondents. This implies that survey statistics stay relatively fixed as the response rate increases.

Compared to changes in response rate, the effect of nonrandom selection methods, in particular, choosing from among those at home when the interviewer calls, might seem straightforward. Yet the consequence for a survey statistic will depend not only on the relation between the statistic and time spent at home, but also on the nature of the survey's calling pattern, as well as the association between time spent at home and willingness to be interviewed. Thus, as with response rates, the absence of empirical studies makes it difficult to gauge the effect of nonrandom selection within households.

To assess the impact of low response rates and nonrandom within-household selection methods, we undertook an experiment in which identical questionnaires were administered by the same survey firm in two different studies: one using "Rigorous" procedures; the other "Standard" procedures. Both studies used a list-assisted random digit dial (RDD) sample of the continental United States, though the Rigorous frame included numbers in banks with one or more published listings, whereas the Standard frame included numbers in banks with three or more listings. As less than 1 percent of the Rigorous interviews were from banks with one or two listings, this difference does not figure importantly in any of our results.

The Standard study was designed to complete 1,000 interviews in 5 days. Using a protocol typical of Pew Center surveys, every number was called a minimum of five times during the period consisting of Wednesday and Thursday evenings, June 18–19, 1997, and the mornings, afternoons, and evenings of Friday through Sunday, June 20–22, 1997. Interviewers asked to speak to the youngest adult male who was home (and, if there was no male present, the oldest adult female who was home). One follow-up call was made to households that refused. The response rate at the end of the 5 days was 36.0 percent.¹

The Rigorous study began at the same time but was conducted over 8

1. We use the rate referred to as RR3 in the AAPOR guidelines for the computation of response rates. $RR3 = \text{completed interviews} / [\text{(completed interviews} + \text{partial interviews}) + (\text{refusals} + \text{noncontacts} + \text{other}) + e(\text{unknown if household or occupied} + \text{unknown other})]$, where e is an estimate of the proportion of unknown outcomes that are eligible. We set e on the basis of a comparison of outcomes after 5 days with outcomes after the entire field period of nearly 2 months. After 5 days, 319 cases had a disposition of no answer on all attempts. Of these, 319 (19.7 percent) were identified as possibly households on subsequent attempts. Thus we chose e to be .20. Response rates for most media polls are generally not made public, but there is some evidence that the rate for the Standard survey is not unusual (Brady and Orren 1992).

weeks, June 18–August 12, 1997, employing a much more exhaustive effort to locate and interview individuals difficult to reach during a short field period and those initially reluctant to participate. Respondents in the Rigorous study were selected randomly from among all adults who lived in the household. In addition, in order to increase cooperation, households with listed telephone numbers were sent an advance letter that included a \$2 bill. The response rate was 60.6 percent.²

Many of our analyses compare the Standard 5-day study and the Rigorous study. But we also take advantage of the fact that data collection on the Standard study continued until July 23 in an effort to maximize the response rate in this study as well. After the first 5 days of both studies, households that refused (and for which an address was available) were sent a letter appealing for cooperation, and two more efforts were made to persuade most refusals (both listed and unlisted) to consent to an interview. Table 1 shows the overall contact, cooperation, and response rates for the Standard 5-day, Standard complete, and Rigorous studies, along with complete call disposition information.

Findings

OVERVIEW

The questionnaire included a wide range of topics often found on opinion polls of the U.S. public. A special effort was made to include items on which we might expect to find differences between amenable and reluctant respondents and between the easy to reach and those who are more difficult to contact (DeMaio 1980; Goudy 1976; Goyder 1987; Stinchcombe, Jones, and Sheatsley 1981). The survey asked 96 items taken from studies conducted by the Pew Center or other major national polls. These included:

2. Interviewing was conducted by the survey research firm of Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Inc., from their facility in New York. Interviewers who worked on this project were blind to the purpose of the experiment but were aware that two surveys with different respondent selection methods were being conducted simultaneously with the same questionnaire. A single pool of interviewers was trained on the questionnaire and the different respondent selection procedures. These interviewers were used interchangeably on the two studies. At the beginning of each shift interviewers were randomly assigned to either the Standard or the Rigorous survey and would stay on that survey for the entire shift. Due in part to the comparatively short field period for the Standard survey and the long field period for the Rigorous survey, only 60 of 160 interviewers actually worked on both. As we note later in the article, the interviewing teams for the two studies differed somewhat on race and gender. For the Standard 5-day survey, 18 percent of interviews were conducted by white males, 30 percent by nonwhite males, 3 percent by white females, and 49 percent by nonwhite females. For the Rigorous survey, 34 percent of interviews were conducted by white males, 28 percent by nonwhite males, 5 percent by white females, and 33 percent by nonwhite females.

Table I. Response Rate Calculations and Call Dispositions by Survey Protocol: Calculation of Response Rates Using AAPOR Standards

Final Disposition Category	Standard	5-Day	Standard Full	Rigorous
Total numbers dialed	4,177		4,193	3,062
I = Complete	1,000		1,527	1,201
P = Partial	0		0	0
R = Refusals/breakoffs	720		689	429
NC = Noncontacts	801		239	125
Respondent away/unavailable				
Answering machine				
Call back				
O = Other	181		243	193
Health				
Language				
UH = Unknown HH eligibility	371		284	166
Busy all attempts				
No answer all attempts				
UO = Unknown other	0		0	0
NE = Not eligible	1,104		1,211	948
Not working/disconnect				
Business/government				
Computer/fax				
No one 18 or older				
Response rate 3 (%) ^a	36.0		55.4	60.6
Cooperation rate 3 (%) ^a	58.1		68.9	73.7
Contact rate 2 (%) ^a	68.5		89.3	92.0

^a American Association for Public Opinion Research 1998.

- 34 Political and social opinion items;
- 5 Electoral behavior measures;
- 8 Media use items;
- 3 Knowledge items;
- 11 Social integration measures (seven objective and four subjective);
- 4 Crime-related items;
- 4 Items about polling;
- 23 Demographic characteristics; and
- 4 Interviewer ratings of the respondent.

Five of the political items were time sensitive (e.g., presidential approval) whose distributions changed in other surveys during the extended field period for the Rigorous survey (between June and August 1997). After removing these five, 91 items were left for which we could compare Rigorous and Standard estimates.

Table 2 shows that 14 of the 91 distributions were significantly different

Table 2. Tests of Homogeneity for Survey Variables between Unweighted 5-Day Standard and Rigorous Studies (Sorted by *p*-Values within Groups)

Item Number	Item Description	Modal Category	% in Modal Category			χ^2	<i>p</i> -Value
			5-Day	Rigorous	All Categories		
Political and social opinion							
Q21d	Opinion of militia groups	Very unfavorable	62	61	9.74	3	.02
Q21j	Opinion of Republican Party	Mostly favorable	46	52	9.60	3	.02
Q4b	Poor people have it easy/poor people have hard lives	Poor people have it easy	37	38	8.42	3	.04
		Mostly favorable	46	47	8.05	3	.04
Q21b	Opinion of labor unions	Mostly favorable	66	69	7.91	3	.048
Q21f	Opinion of blacks	Mostly favorable	35	36	5.97	2	.050
D13	Political affiliation	Democrat					
Q4d	Racial discrimination/responsible for own condition	Feel strongly blacks are responsible for own condition	46	48	6.95	3	.07
		Mostly favorable	66	63	6.95	3	.07
Q21g	Opinion of Hispanics	Restricted	35	31	6.92	3	.08
Q5	Abortion should be generally available/restricted/not permitted	Favorable	65	68	5.47	3	.14
Q21c	Opinion of business corporations	Feel strongly will be called to answer for our sins	80	77	5.20	3	.16
Q35c	Answer for sins on judgement day/don't have to answer for sins	Feel strongly business corporations make too much profit/fair and reasonable profit	46	44	5.03	3	.17
Q4f	Business corporations make too much profit/fair and reasonable profit	Feel strongly should be discouraged	43	40	4.82	3	.19
Q35a	Homosexuality should be accepted/rejected	Feel strongly elected officials don't care	58	53	4.80	3	.19
Q4g	Most elected officials care what people think/don't care	Mostly favorable	64	68	4.02	3	.26
Q21h	Opinion of Asians						

D14	Lean more toward Democrat/Republican	Democrat	53	58	1.23	1	.27
Q35b	Books should be banned from public libraries/libraries should carry what they want	Feel strongly books that contain dangerous ideas should be banned	41	44	3.61	3	.31
Q21a	Opinion of Congress	Mostly favorable	51	55	3.50	3	.32
Q21e	Opinion of Jews	Mostly favorable	62	65	3.47	3	.32
Q6	Index of conservative opinions (Q4a, Q4b, Q5, Q22, Q35a, Q35b; alpha = .49) Expectations of taxes for the average American in 2000	Mean	<i>M</i> = 2.57	2.52	1.67	6	.95
Q7	Best ideas on middle-class tax cuts	The average American will pay more taxes	93	94	.75	1	.39
Q4a	Government always wasteful and inefficient/government does a better job	Republican congressional leaders	37	37	2.75	3	.43
Q22	Political ideology	Feel strongly government is always wasteful and inefficient	51	49	2.68	3	.44
Q8a	Can government reduce budget deficit and cut taxes	Moderate	42	42	2.98	4	.56
Q4e	Immigrants today strengthen country/burden country	Can't do it	51	50	.29	1	.59
Q35d	No excuse for Oklahoma City bombing/understand anger and frustration	Feel strongly immigrants burden country	40	41	1.56	3	.67
Q8	Highest priority cutting taxes for middle class/reduce budget deficit	Feel strongly no excuse	86	86	1.40	3	.70
Q4c	Position of blacks has improved/hasn't been much real progress	Reduce budget deficit	57	57	.45	2	.80
Q21l	Opinion of the Democratic Party	Feel strongly position of blacks has improved	58	59	.84	3	.84
D15	Electoral behavior	Favorable	55	54	.51	3	.92
D16	Vote in 1996	Voted in 1996	74	76	1.05	1	.30
D17	Presidential vote 1996	Voted for Clinton in 1996	55	58	3.33	3	.34
D12	House vote 1996	Voted for Republican	44	46	1.83	3	.61
D11	Voting frequency	Always vote	44	43	1.66	4	.80
	Registered voter	Registered to vote	79	79	.00	1	.98

Table 2. (Continued)

Item Number	Item Description	Modal Category	% in Modal Category				
			5-Day	Rigorous	All Categories	χ^2	df
Media use							
Q13a	Use a computer to connect to online services	Connects to online services Use a computer	49 63	54 66	3.53 2.69	1	.06
Q13	Use a computer						
Q12c	Watch daytime talk shows (Lake, Springer, Jones)	Never watch Never listen Did not listen to radio news Never listen	59 73 50 57	61 72 52 55	5.78 3.02 .69 1.95	3	.12
Q12a	Listen to Rush Limbaugh's radio show						
Q11	Listen to radio yesterday						
Q12b	Listen to religious radio shows						
	Index of media usage (Q9, Q10, Q11; al-pha = .35)	Mean	$M = 1.64$	$M = 1.61$	1.15	3	.77
Q10	Watch news/news program yesterday	Watched yesterday Did not read a newspaper	66 52	65 52	.04 .03	1	.83
Q9	Read newspaper yesterday						
Knowledge							
	Index of knowledge (Q18, Q19, Q20; al-pha = .60)	Mean	$M = 1.36$	$M = 1.40$	2.42	3	.49
Q18	Political party having majority in House of Representatives	Republicans	51	52	.23	1	.63
Q20	Know who Bill Gates is	Incorrect or don't know	52	49	.09	1	.77
Q19	Individual who lent Newt Gingrich money to pay ethics fine	Incorrect or don't know					
Social integration							

		Volunteer on occasional basis	44	53	10.46	2	.005
		Can turn to many people	43	47	4.74	2	.09
Q28a	Frequency of volunteer work						
Q26	Amount of social support						
Q14	Most people can be trusted/can't be too careful	Can't be too careful	56	52	2.72	1	.10
	Most people take advantage/try to be fair	Most people try to be fair	60	63	2.20	1	.14
Q15	Most people try to be helpful/looking out for themselves	People try to be helpful	60	63	2.05	1	.15
Q16	Exercise yesterday	Did not exercise yesterday	63	60	1.54	1	.22
Q17b	Call a friend or relative yesterday	Called a friend or relative	66	68	1.39	1	.24
Q17c	Index of trust (Q14, Q15, Q16; alpha = .72)	Mean	<i>M</i> = 1.54	1.66	6.07	3	.11
Q17d	Index of social activity (Q17a, Q17b, Q17c, Q17d, Q28; alpha = .31)	Mean	<i>M</i> = 2.67	2.71	3.99	5	.55
	Go shopping for something other than food or medicine yesterday	Did not go shopping	70	71	.32	1	.57
	Visit with family or friends yesterday	Visited w/family and friends	74	73	.16	1	.69
Q17a	Have done volunteer work in the past year	Yes	60	60	.01	1	.94
Q28	Frequency of religious service attendance	Once a week	28	28	.48	5	.99
Q27	Crime and guns						
Q33b	Assaulted this past year	Has not been physically assaulted or mugged	89	90	1.33	2	.52
Q32	How safe is neighborhood when walking after dark	Neighborhood is very safe	46	47	1.58	3	.66
	Property stolen this past year	Did not have money or property stolen	67	68	.71	2	.70
Q33a	Guns or revolvers at home	Do not have guns or revolvers in home	61	61	.14	1	.71
Q34	Polling	Would participate again	79	81	1.37	1	.24
D27	Willing to do interview again	Random sample insufficient	70	69	.27	1	.60
Q37	Random sample of 1,500 or 2,000 people sufficient	Opinion polls work for/against public interest	77	78	.22	1	.64
Q36	Opinion polls work for the best interests						

Table 2. (Continued)

Item Number	Item Description	Modal Category	% in Modal Category			χ^2	df	p-Value
			5-Day	Rigorous	All Categories			
Q38	Ever done a public opinion poll	Have never been questioned in an opinion poll	53	53	.06	1	.81	
	Demographics							
Q30	No money for clothes	Not without money to buy clothes	80	86	11.37	1	.001	
D25	Listed/unlisted	Listed in telephone directory	73	79	13.00	2	.002	
D18	Own/rent	Homeowner	67	72	10.00	2	.007	
D10	Household income	\$50,000–\$74,999	16	19	19.12	7	.008	
D5	Respondent's race	White	79	83	10.53	3	.015	
D3	Respondent's education	High school graduate	38	34	8.73	3	.04	
Q29	No money for food	Not without money to buy food	82	85	4.27	1	.04	
D23a	Number of adults living in household	Two	52	55	8.95	4	.06	
Q31	No money for medical or health care	Not without money to pay for medical or health care	78	81	2.87	1	.09	
D9a	Would not consider self a born-again or evangelical Christian		59	62	2.31	1	.13	
	Age 35–44		24	23	8.24	5	.14	
D2	Hispanic origin or descent	Not of Hispanic origin or descent	93	94	1.73	1	.19	
D4	Respondent's gender	Female	56	58	1.62	1	.20	
D1	Years lived in community							
D22	Marital status	Married	54	56	6.52	5	.26	
D7	Lifetime in community	Has not lived in community entire life	69	71	4.96	4	.29	
D21	Number of people living in household	Two	32	33	.86	1	.35	
D23					4.20	5	.52	

D6	Parents or grandparents from a country other than the U.S.A.	Parents/grandparents born in U.S.A.
D20	Urbanicity	Small city or town
D9	Religious preference	Protestant
D19	Employment status	Employed full time
D8	Parent or guardian of children in household	No children in household
D24	Number of telephone numbers	One
	Interviewer ratings of respondent	
D29	Respondent's interest	Average
D31	Respondent's hearing	No degree of hearing loss
D28	Respondent's cooperation	Very good
D30	Respondent's facility with English	Fully conversant

($p < .05$) between the Standard 5-day and Rigorous studies: seven demographics, five opinion items, one interviewer rating, and one social integration measure (a behavior). But the differences were generally small, none exceeding 9 percentage points.³

As one way to test whether the small differences between the studies were systematic, we combined individual items to produce a three-item media use scale, a three-item knowledge scale, a six-item conservative/liberal scale, a five-item social activity scale (using the objective social integration measures), and a three-item trust scale (using the subjective social integration measures). None of the scale distributions differed between the Rigorous and Standard 5-day studies (p value for the trust scale was .11; for the rest the p value was greater than .48).

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

Demographic variables provide an especially useful basis of comparison between the Standard and Rigorous surveys. Demographic characteristics are intrinsically important since they are related to many attitudes and behaviors studied in public opinion surveys. Moreover, for many demographics we have independent, more accurate information about the population parameters and thus can judge not only how the two surveys differ but which is closer to reality (as defined and documented by official government statistics).

Seven of the questionnaire's 23 demographic items differed significantly ($p < .05$) between the Rigorous and Standard 5-day studies: income, home ownership, education, race, having been short of money for clothes in the past year, having been short of money for food in the past year, and listed versus unlisted phone. Estimates for the first four items are also available for telephone households from the March 1996 Current Population Survey (CPS), and the distributions from all three studies are shown in Table 3A.⁴ Compared to the Rigorous study, a greater proportion of Standard 5-day respondents were nonwhite, less educated, lower income, and renters. In general, the Standard distributions on these items resemble the CPS more closely than do the Rigorous distributions, but the differences are modest. The average absolute percentage point difference between the CPS and the Standard sample

3. These are unweighted results. The chi-square tests were conducted without collapsing any of the categories of the variables; "don't know" and "no answer" responses were excluded and are discussed in Table 4. We also carried out the analysis using weighted data. For the Standard sample, we followed normal Pew procedure, which is to poststratify to Current Population Study totals using age by sex, education by sex, education by age, and the marginals of region and race. For the Rigorous sample, we adjusted to those totals and also corrected for differential numbers of phone lines and adults (which are not used in Pew's standard procedure). The differences between the weighted estimates are very similar to those reported in the text based on the unweighted data. (Of course, for demographic variables used in the weighting, differences between the samples were eliminated when the weighting was applied.)

4. Estimates from the Current Population Survey are weighted and adjusted, using independent estimates of the civilian noninstitutional population, by the Bureau of the Census.

Table 3. Unweighted Respondent Distributions on Demographic Variables by Survey Protocol, Compared to 1996 Current Population Survey Distributions (Significant Differences between Standard and Rigorous)

Subgroup	1996 CPS (Telephone Households Only) (%)	Standard 5-Day (n = 1,000) (%)	Rigorous (n = 1,201) (%)
A. Significant differences between Standard and Rigorous			
Household income:			
Less than \$20K	27	26	21
\$20–\$29.9K	15	17	17
\$30–\$49.9K	24	29	27
\$50–\$74.9K	18	16	19
\$75K+	16	12	16
Total	100	100	100
Home ownership:			
Own	68	66	72
Rent	31	30	24
Other	1	4	4
Total	100	100	100
Education:			
Less than HS	18	11	9
HS graduate	37	38	34
Some college	23	23	24
College plus	22	28	33
Total	100	100	100
Race:			
White	85	79	83
Black	11	13	9
Other	4	8	8
Total	100	100	100
B. Nonsignificant differences			
Ethnicity:			
Hispanic	9	7	6
Not Hispanic	91	93	94
Total	100	100	100
Marital status:			
Married	59	54	56
Not married	41	46	44
Total	100	100	100

Table 3. (*Continued*)

Subgroup	1996 CPS (Telephone Households Only) (%)	Standard 5-Day (n = 1,000) (%)	Rigorous (n = 1,201) (%)
Employment:			
Full time	54	55	55
Part time	12	11	12
Not employed	34	34	33
Total	100	100	100
No. of adults:			
One	30	30	27
Two	55	52	55
Three or more	14	18	18
Total	100	100	100
Sex:			
Male	48	44	42
Female	52	56	58
Total	100	100	100
Age:			
18–24	12	12	9
25–34	21	20	19
35–44	22	24	23
45–54	17	15	18
55–64	11	12	12
65+	17	17	19
Total	100	100	100
Gender by age:			
Female, 18–29	11	10	9
Female, 30–49	22	24	27
Female, 50+	19	21	22
Male, 18–29	11	11	7
Male, 30–49	21	21	19
Male, 50+	16	13	16
Total	100	100	100

for these four comparisons is 3.1, compared with an average difference of 3.9 between the CPS and Rigorous sample.

Table 3B presents the same comparisons for the six nonsignificant demographic differences between Rigorous and Standard studies for which estimates

are also available in the CPS. There is little evidence of differential bias in the Standard and Rigorous surveys on these variables.

DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ATTITUDES AND ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR

We found only the barest support for the charge that Standard procedures—relative to the Rigorous protocol—underrepresent conservatives and Republicans. On the one hand, the only five significant differences on political and social issues were a result of respondents in the Standard 5-day survey giving more favorable ratings (summing “very” and “mostly”) to labor unions, militia groups, and blacks, less favorable ratings to the Republican party, and more endorsement (summing “strong” and “not strong”) to the position that the poor “have hard lives because government benefits don’t go far enough to help them.” On the other hand, none of these differences exceeded 4 percentage points, and respondents in the Standard and Rigorous surveys were nearly identical on party affiliation, self-described ideology, candidates voted for in recent elections, and a host of other political attitudes (Table 2). (Although the difference on party identification is just shy of $p < .05$, the effect stems from somewhat more Standard study respondents saying they were independents; the ratio of Republicans to Democrats does not differ between the studies.)

MEDIA USE, KNOWLEDGE, AND ENGAGEMENT IN POLITICS

Citizens who are uninterested in politics, who pay little attention to the news, or have little information about current events may decline to participate in media-related surveys, either out of concern that they will appear uninformed or because they do not want to devote the time necessary to participate (Brehm 1993). By this logic, a survey that reaches more reluctant respondents will provide a more accurate view of public opinion. And presumably such a survey will reflect lower overall levels of voter participation, attention to the news, and knowledge of politics. Yet the Rigorous and Standard 5-day studies generally did not differ on these dimensions. There were essentially no differences between the studies in the percentages who reported reading a newspaper, listening to radio and TV news or talk shows, knowing Bob Dole loaned Newt Gingrich some of the money he needed to pay his ethics fine, knowing Republicans have a majority in the U.S. House, being able to identify Bill Gates, or voting in the 1996 elections. Finally, although the Rigorous survey contained somewhat more computer and Internet users, the differences just missed being statistically significant.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Willingness to participate in surveys is plausibly related to social integration. On the one hand, people low on social integration tend to be less trusting of others, which might discourage participation in surveys. On the other hand, people high on social integration may engage in many more activities and thus either have less time to participate in surveys or spend less time at home and thus be harder to contact. Based on a comparison of the Standard 5-day and Rigorous surveys, neither theory—at least as stated in these forms—receives much support.

There were no differences between surveys on three standard trust items: whether “most people can be trusted” or “you can’t be too careful in dealing with people,” whether “most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance” or “they would try to be fair,” and whether “most of the time people try to be helpful” or they are “mostly just looking out for themselves.” Respondents in the two surveys also reported a nearly identical level of interaction with other people (visited with family or friends on the day before the survey, and called a friend or relative just to talk the prior day), fairly similar numbers of other people the respondent could count on for support, and a virtually identical level of attendance at religious services. Finally, although there was little difference between studies in the percentage reporting having done volunteer work in the past year, significantly more respondents in the Standard 5-day than in the Rigorous survey reported doing regular, as opposed to occasional, volunteer work ($p < .05$).

CRIME-RELATED ITEMS

Many survey researchers believe that concerns about safety affect some potential respondents’ willingness to participate in surveys. Telemarketing fraud is a serious problem, with unscrupulous persons and organizations engaging in unethical or illegal activities under the guise of conducting a survey. In addition, some people may fear that a potential burglar or mugger might employ a survey as a ruse to ascertain whether or not an individual is at home, who else might be in the household, and what property might be available. Accordingly, we might expect that, compared with the Standard survey, the Rigorous survey would have picked up more respondents who were concerned about crime or who had experienced it. Among other differences, the presurvey letters sent to many of the respondents in the Rigorous survey should have helped ease fears about the legitimacy of the survey (though, of course, such letters went only to people whose phone numbers were listed with an address in the telephone directory).

But the extent of fear of neighborhood crime and the familiarity or experience with criminal victimization in the neighborhood did not differ significantly between the Standard 5-day and Rigorous surveys, nor was there a

significant difference between the surveys in the percentage of respondents who reported that they keep a firearm in their house.

ATTITUDES TOWARD SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWER RATINGS

We might expect more reluctant respondents to have more skeptical attitudes about surveys in general and perhaps to be less likely to have ever participated in a public opinion poll before. Yet despite these expectations, there were no statistically significant differences between the surveys in responding that polls work for the best interests of the general public and that a random survey of 1,500 or 2,000 people can accurately reflect the views of the nation's population. Nor were there significant differences in reporting having been interviewed in a poll in the past, or expressing a willingness at the end of the interview to do the interview if they had the choice again.

While respondents in the two surveys reported having similar attitudes toward surveys, the interviewers themselves differed in their views of the respondents. More respondents in the Standard survey received ratings of "very high" or "above average" interest than in the Rigorous survey. Indeed, this difference, 9 points, was the largest we found.

Effects of Accessibility versus Amenability

Survey nonresponse is largely the result of two broad problems: some sample persons are relatively inaccessible to the surveyor, unamenable to cooperating, or both. Our results demonstrate the effect of efforts to deal with these problems on rates of nonresponse. In the 5-day field period of the Standard survey, contact was made with 68.5 percent of telephone numbers assumed to be working residential phones. By the end of the Standard study, the contact rate rose to 89.3 percent (and was 92.0 percent for the Rigorous study). Similarly, at the end of the 5-day field period, the cooperation rate for the Standard study was 58.1 percent. Through the use of such techniques as a letter to households that refused and persistence in attempting to convert refusals, the cooperation rates at the conclusion of the project were 68.9 percent for the Standard study and 73.7 percent for the Rigorous study.

While the comparisons between the 5-day Standard and the full Rigorous studies provide a "bottom line" measure of the impact of survey nonresponse, it is possible to gauge the consequences of accessibility and amenability more directly by examining each phenomenon separately. Therefore, we shall compare the accessible with the inaccessible and the amenable with the reluctant.

AMENABILITY

Before proceeding to the analysis of amenability, a brief discussion of method is warranted. We will be combining across the Standard and Rigorous samples and comparing data from households that never refused with households where one or two refusals occurred. For all cases except the one-person households, we do not know whether the same person refused and later granted a completed interview; in many instances different people will have been involved. Accordingly, we refer to “amenable households” and “reluctant households.”

It comes as no surprise that compared to those from reluctant households respondents from amenable households were rated by interviewers as more cooperative and more interested in the interview and more likely to say, having completed the survey, that they would agree to do such a survey again. Aside from these almost tautological effects, the remaining 88 items show only about the number of statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between amenable and reluctant households that would be expected by chance (5 of 88): two demographics (listed/unlisted status and employment status) and three opinion items. But two of the three opinion items are about blacks—the favorability rating of blacks (that also differs between Standard 5-day and Rigorous studies) and the judgment about whether racial discrimination is responsible for the condition of blacks (Q4d, which was of borderline significance in the Standard versus Rigorous comparison). Moreover, the difference between amenable and reluctant households in ratings of Asians just misses being significant. In each of these cases, fewer reluctant households express sympathetic attitudes toward the minority groups.

ACCESSIBILITY

In the combined Rigorous and Standard samples, number of calls to first contact with the household is significantly related ($p < .05$) to 20 of our items. Two of the largest associations are with age and education. The young are more difficult to reach, as are the better educated. Those households containing one adult and those with employed respondents also required more calls to first contact. These patterns are well established in the literature (Groves and Couper 1998). Most of the other 16 differences involve items that are strongly related to age and education: five media use items, one knowledge item (with a second just missing significance), two social integration measures, five other demographics, one interviewer rating (of the respondent’s hearing), and only two opinion items.

Analysis of Item Nonresponse

Aside from substantive differences between amenable and reluctant respondents, we might also expect to find differences in ability or willingness to

Table 4. Mean Number of Items with Missing Data by Survey Protocol, Number of Prior Refusals before Interview, and Refusal Count and Calls to First Contact

	<i>M</i>	SE
Entire sample (<i>n</i> = 2,728)	2.9	.09
Standard (<i>n</i> = 1,000)	3.0	.15
Rigorous (<i>n</i> = 1,201)	2.8	.13
No refusals (<i>n</i> = 2,186)	2.8	.10
One refusal (<i>n</i> = 342)	3.0	.27
Two refusals (<i>n</i> = 200)	3.5	.37
No refusals, ≤ 10 calls (<i>n</i> = 1,841)	2.9	.11
No refusals, > 10 calls (<i>n</i> = 345)	2.6	.21
Refusal, ≤ 10 calls (<i>n</i> = 372)	3.4	.28
Refusal, > 10 calls (<i>n</i> = 170)	2.9	.32

provide responses to questions. Reluctance to participate might translate into reluctance to answer certain questions, either because of an unwillingness to reveal one's opinions or disclose details about one's personal situation or because of a genuine inability to answer questions. Evidence to support this expectation has been found by Blair and Chun (1992) and by Triplett et al. (1996).

Two approaches were used to measure differences in item nonresponse. First we computed an index of the number of questions on which the respondent declined to provide a substantive response, and then examined the relation of this index to our measures of amenability and accessibility. As Table 4 shows, the mean item nonresponse for all respondents in both surveys was 2.9 items (out of 89). Mean nonresponse for amenable households was 2.8; for reluctant households it was 3.2, a difference that just missed statistical significance ($p < .08$). A greater difference was seen when reluctant households were divided according to whether there had been one or two refusals. Single refuser households had a mean item nonresponse of 3.0, while the mean for double refusers was 3.5. The difference between double refusers and amenable households met the conventional test for statistical significance ($p < .05$). When accessibility is also considered, we find that item nonresponse was actually lower among respondents in households where more than 10 calls were required to obtain an interview.⁵ The lowest level of item nonresponse was found in households where no refusal occurred but more than 10 calls were made.

5. This is almost certainly a consequence of the fact that inaccessible respondents tended to have higher levels of education.

A second indicator entailed a comparison of item nonresponse percentages for each item in the survey.⁶ Of 85 comparisons on which differences could be computed, the mean absolute difference in nonresponse percentage between amenable and reluctant respondents was 0.9 percentage points, with a range from -4.2 percent (a minus indicating that reluctant respondents had more nonresponse than amenable respondents) to +3.9 percent; the median difference was 0.5 percentage points. Of the 85 comparisons, 16 were significant at the .05 level, though it should be noted that seven of these 16 involved percentage differences smaller than 0.5 percent.⁷ More of the differences favor the hypothesis that nonresponse will be greater in reluctant respondents than in amenable ones, but the difference is quite minimal.

Multivariate Ransacking

Following the analyses above, which were to some extent guided by the past literature on patterns of nonresponse error in surveys, we constructed two approaches at statistical ransacking of the data. The purpose of these exercises was to leave no stone unturned in an effort to discover patterns of relationships that might reveal differences between the two surveys.

Both ransacking approaches set up a dependent variable that was coded "1" if the respondent case was from the Rigorous survey and "0" if it was from the Standard 5-day survey. We first used stepwise OLS regression procedures to locate single variables that were highly correlated with that dependent variable (comforted by the fact that the near 50-50 split of the dependent variable would not threaten homoskedasticity assumptions too violently and using $p < .10$ cutoffs for inclusion of a predictor). In essence, this asked which groups were most differentially distributed between the two samples. The second ransacking procedure used a stepwise interaction detection procedure (CHAID in SPSS, with $p < .10$ cutoffs and cell size minima of 100) that sequentially broke the respondent pool into groups that were maximally different in the percentages in the two surveys. One can think of the first procedure as identifying main effects and the second as identifying interaction effects on the likelihood of being a respondent under the two protocols.

The forward stepwise regression identified interviewer experience (number of months) as the single most powerful predictor, with more experienced interviewers more likely to conduct interviews in the rigorous study. The second predictor was interviewer race. In short, more experienced, white

6. The three political knowledge items were not included in this analysis since nonresponse has a direct substantive interpretation on these questions.

7. In some of these comparisons, four or five of the reluctant respondents refused to answer compared with none of the amenable respondents.

interviewers tended to conduct the Rigorous interviews and less experienced, black interviewers conducted the Standard.

The CHAID analysis produced results quite compatible with the OLS regression analysis. Interviewer experience, race, and sex were the dominant predictors. After these were entered into the model, the only substantive variable was opinion of the Republican party, but it was a significant discriminator between the Standard and Rigorous samples for only a small subset of interviewers.

The surprise from this exercise was that it revealed interviewer staffing differences in the two surveys. Further investigation revealed that only about 60 of the approximately 160 interviewers worked on both the Standard and Rigorous surveys. White male interviewers did a much higher proportion of the Rigorous survey interviews than they did of the Standard.

The reader will recall that less racially liberal answers were provided by respondents that came into the data set after refusal conversions. Race-of-interviewer effects on racial attitude questions have been well documented (e.g., Hatchett and Schuman 1975; Schuman and Converse 1971) and were observed on racial attitude questions here.⁸ For that reason, we fit a set of logistic models that predicted the two racial attitude items that showed a significant amenability effect (opinion toward blacks and agreement with the statement that racial discrimination is the main cause of blacks not getting ahead). Bivariate logit models again showed significantly fewer racially "liberal" responses for those interviewed after a refusal conversion than for those who provided the interview with less reluctance. Multivariate logit models revealed that when statistical controls for interviewer race and gender were introduced, the original relationships diminished, though in both cases they were still near the conventional .05 significance cutoff (.08 and .04). Thus the finding that the reluctant respondents were less racially tolerant appears to be at least partly due to interviewer staffing differences.

Cost Comparisons

A final consideration in assessing the results is the relative cost of the Standard and Rigorous surveys. The limited time and resources available to conduct polls make compromises and trade-offs necessary in their design and implementation. Researchers are faced with difficult decisions about the best use of resources to obtain the most accurate and representative snapshot of the public at a given time. Resources must be divided among survey tasks such

8. In the Rigorous sample, white respondents interviewed by black interviewers were 9 percentage points more likely than those interviewed by white interviewers to say they had a "very favorable" opinion of blacks; in the Standard sample the difference was 6 points. In the Rigorous sample, white respondents interviewed by black interviewers were 16 percentage points more likely than those interviewed by white interviewers to agree that racial discrimination is the main reason why blacks cannot get ahead; in the Standard sample the difference was 7 points.

Table 5. Mean Number of Completed Interviews per Hour by Time Periods during Data Collection, by Survey Protocol

	Standard	Rigorous
Short field period	.99	.97
First week after	1.01	1.00
Second week	.79	.59
Third week	.58	.62
Fourth week	.39	.40
Fifth week	.26	.23
Sixth week	N.A.	.13
Seventh week	N.A.	.24
Eighth week	N.A.	.75
Total	.85	.79
Total for 5-Day	.99	

as questionnaire design, sample design, length of field period, call design, respondent selection, and precontact, among others. Given these practical constraints of conducting public opinion polls, it is important to understand the cost implications of project design decisions in order to arrive at a reasoned approach to the juggling of competing priorities.

Two direct costs associated with conducting these two surveys can be compared for the purposes of making a general cost comparison across the surveys. First, the direct costs of matching the RDD sample to obtain addresses where possible and the cost of advance letters, incentives, and refusal conversion letters can be estimated. All of these costs were incurred for the Rigorous design only. Second, the interviewing productivity of the two surveys can be compared and translated into another direct cost—interviewing hours.

Comparing the Standard 5-day survey and the Rigorous survey on these direct costs illustrates the impact of the Rigorous design on the cost of the survey. Table 5 shows the productivity rates (calculated as number of completes divided by number of interviewing hours) for the two surveys during different time periods throughout the data collection. As the field period progressed, the productivity rates dropped off for both surveys, as would be expected. The difference between the two surveys at comparable points in time is not large, suggesting that the respondent selection and sample differences do not have a big impact on productivity and that it is mostly the extended field time and call design that lower productivity.⁹

9. The productivity of the two studies during Phase I is similar, but it should be remembered

The overall productivity rate for the Standard survey is .99 compared with the overall Rigorous survey productivity of .79. On a survey of 1,000 cases, this difference in productivity would translate into a difference of 256 interviewing hours (approximately a 25 percent increase). In addition, these interviewing hours would also require additional supervisory time, data-processing time, CATI time, and so on. In conjunction with the additional costs of the advance letters and incentives, and refusal conversion letters (approximately \$6,000 for these costs in a 1,000 case survey), this represents a significant cost increase of the Rigorous design over the Standard 5-day design.

Conclusion

Rates of participation in sample surveys are one of the most pressing issues in the field. This is true both because of concerns about nonresponse bias in survey estimates, and also because efforts to maintain response rates in the face of growing reluctance to participate greatly increase the costs of surveys. This study addressed a very practical question: What differences arise in point estimates subject to different response rates?

Like most experimental designs, this study offers a demonstration conditional on a set of features of the measurement situation. The two surveys achieved different contact, cooperation, and overall response rates. The Rigorous achieved a higher response rate with a specific set of features (i.e., advance letters and incentives for listed numbers, repeated callbacks, and refusal conversions over an extended time period). The 36.0 percent versus 60.6 percent response rates are substantially different, but do not permit us to make inferences about the effect of other field efforts on nonresponse error. This is partly because the two studies used different within-household selection methods. More important, the results offer only two observations on the response rate continuum from 0 to 100 percent, and it would be inappropriate to use the evidence to note that the same results would apply if the 5-day protocol had been reduced to 1 or 2 days, or the Rigorous protocol had achieved a response rate of 75 percent.

The value of the experimental evidence, we believe, will be in stimulating other work attempting to discover under what circumstances and for what measures nonresponse rate differences imply disparate nonresponse errors. We expect that such work requires theory development that links the decision to participate with the purposes of the survey. Past research demonstrating nonresponse error is of that ilk (e.g., membership surveys showing disproportionate response from active vs. inactive members and election surveys that found higher cooperation from the politically active; Brehm 1993). How those

that part of the Rigorous sample received an advance letter and monetary incentive. This may have boosted productivity, offsetting the advantages provided by the at-home respondent selection scheme in the Standard survey.

mechanisms are manifested in successive waves of effort to measure sample persons, however, has not been well developed in the literature. This is the work that needs to be done in the future.

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