



Does survey mode matter for studying electoral behaviour? Evidence from the 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study



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ABSTRACT

Online surveys are becoming increasingly popular in the social sciences, particularly in electoral research. However, several studies have shown that participants who take part in online surveys differ significantly from those in other surveys. Still, since electoral research aims primarily at explaining voting behaviour (i.e., looks at slopes and intercepts in statistical model output), online surveys are deemed to be useful tools if models based on this data source arrive at similar conclusions than models based e.g. on random-sample face-to-face or telephone surveys. This paper analyses these relationships by comparing models of voting behaviour based on data from various survey modes with different sample selections conducted by the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) 2009. The results indicate that the data quality of the different survey types is comparable; online surveys are thus useful for electoral research.

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1. Introduction

Face-to-face and telephone surveys have long been considered the best methods in quantitative empirical social research to generate high-quality data providing adequate information regarding opinions, attitudes and behaviour of the population (see Dillman, 1978). Since the beginning of this century, however, a further polling method has become increasingly popular: online surveys play a more and more important role in public opinion polling, as well as in empirical social research (cf. Callegaro et al., 2014a; Dillman et al., 2014).

The advantage of this method is obvious: in comparison to traditional survey modes, online surveys can be conducted at comparably low cost (Callegaro et al., 2014b). Despite this benefit, online surveys frequently face criticism. Although traditional surveys have numerous flaws (coverage, non-response, measurement errors), online surveys are often criticized regarding their lack of representativeness. Representativeness basically means that the survey participants should represent the entire population and thus is the prerequisite for statistical inference, the procedure commonly used in electoral research (Callegaro et al., 2014a;

Pötschke, 2010); hence, with regard to electoral research, respondents need to represent all eligible voters.

Face-to-face interviews and telephone surveys have long been deemed appropriate methods for generating (putative) representative data for electoral research. When drawing representative samples, two points are important: first, every member of the target population must be accessible and, second, the selection of respondents from the target population must be based on a random selection. Both conditions can be easily met with telephone and face-to-face surveys by using RDD, address-random-route-sampling or population registries. The criticism regarding online surveys is linked to both preconditions: not all voters have an internet connection and there is no register including e-mail-addresses of all voters on the basis of which a random sample could be drawn.

However, this criticism can be applied only to some forms of online surveys because there are different ways to select respondents: generally, a distinction has to be made between *probability-based* and *nonprobability-based approaches* (cf. Couper, 2000; Couper and Miller, 2008). A probability-based approach is characterised by the fact that respondents are selected on the basis of a random sample (e.g. a telephone sample). If a person does not own a computer or does not have an internet connection, the necessary hardware and internet connection will be supplied for the period of the study (cf. Chang and Krosnick, 2009; Tourangeau

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et al., 2013). Although this procedure can generally be considered as the method of choice – Chang and Krosnick (2009) even prefer this method to telephone interviewing – and more and more panels are likely to do this (e.g. GIP, LISS, GfK Knowledge Networks, ALP) it cannot be classified as cost-effective nor as time-saving for those cases where hardware needs to be provided.

Therefore, to collect data quickly and cheaply non-probability samples are often used: In this context, a distinction between an *active* and *passive selection* of the survey participants can be made (ADM, 2001). In a passive selection, the participants recruit themselves (so-called unrestricted self-selected survey or open online surveys; cf. Couper, 2000; Faas and Schoen, 2006), which means that the research institute cannot decide who should take part in the survey. In contrast, in an active selection the institute itself determines who it will ask to participate in the survey.

Non-probability panels with an active selection are called volunteer opt-in panels or online access panels. The participants are approached on different kinds of internet portals and highly visible websites, where they must first register with the panel provider (cf. Couper, 2000; Yeager et al., 2011). The participants can then be selected from this pool for a specific survey by means of a random selection and/or specific quotas relevant for the study (ADM, 2001). Nevertheless, although drawing a random selection is a necessary condition for design-based inference, it is not sufficient. In particular online surveys have the problem that on the one hand not many people agree to join access panels at all. On the other hand many invited participants do not participate in the survey. Therefore, the response rate is low compared to other survey modes (Tourangeau et al., 2013) and a large nonresponse-error is common. Therefore, the representative character of such surveys is often questioned.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that survey mode and nonresponse are different things, and we consider a combination of both in our analysis. However, this is not problematic since these compound effects match many of the survey strategies in the world and in electoral research. Consequently, since empirical electoral research depends on survey data which can be used to make statements about the whole electorate based on a small sample of voters, the question arises whether the problems with recruiting survey participants makes it feasible at all to use online surveys to analyse voting behaviour. However, the focus of scientific electoral research lies less in the exact representation of frequency distributions but rather in the explanation of political behaviour via statistical models (in which both intercepts and slopes are of interest to researchers), in particular regarding turnout and voting decision under consideration of socio-demographic characteristics and political settings. Why and for what reason did some people decide to vote or not to vote, and which voters voted for which parties and for what reasons? These questions are the main focus of scientific electoral research.

From this point of view, online surveys might be considered useful for empirical electoral research, given that models based on online survey data yield similar results with regard to the explanation of voting behaviour compared to models based on random-sample face-to-face and telephone survey data. Whether this is the case and if supporting evidence can be presented is the topic of this paper. In order to analyse the quality of online surveys with regard to voter turnout and vote decision, the results of the corresponding models based on two online surveys are compared with a face-to-face survey, as well as a telephone survey. Since there are a number of factors in addition to random sampling and response rate which can lead to differences between surveys (e.g. nonresponse), we will additionally compare the face-to-face survey with the telephone survey. If the deviations between online and face-to-face and/or telephone survey are found to be within a

similar range compared to the deviations between the face-to-face and the telephone survey, we have evidence that, in our case, online surveys deliver comparable results with regard to models of voting behaviour than do both of these “traditional” survey modes. This can be a further confirmation that online surveys are an appropriate method for electoral research and can therefore be beneficial for empirical social research. The most important consideration when conducting such comparative studies is keeping as many factors constant as possible. The present study has the advantage that surveys were conducted as part of the *German Longitudinal Election Study* (GLES) for the 2009 Federal Election using different modes but with similar times of interviewing and largely identical questions (except necessary adjustments concerning survey mode, see Schmitt-Beck et al., 2010a). This data base thus allows a stringent comparison between online, telephone and face-to-face surveys.

To assess the usefulness of online surveys for electoral research, we start with a brief overview of recent research within this area in the next part. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the data and models we used. After that, we will present the results of our analyses, which will also be summarised and discussed in the final part of the paper.

2. Theoretical background

Due to their recent popularity, online surveys have been the subject of a number of methodological works discussing data quality (see Callegaro et al., 2014c; Callegaro and DiSogra, 2008; Couper, 2000). In addition to general questions about data quality, some researchers have been analysing the difference between traditional and online survey modes. Are there differences with regard to frequency of item-nonresponse, the extremity (range of variation) of answers or the time respondents took to answer specific items? Can specific patterns be found amongst those who do not finish the survey? And does quota arrangement or weighting (for example propensity score weighting) improve the quality of online data? (see Ansolabehere and Schaffner, 2014; Bethlehem and Biffignandi, 2012; Callegaro et al., 2014c; Heerwegh, 2009; Heerwegh and Loosveldt, 2008; Kaplowitz et al., 2004; Schonlau et al., 2009; Tourangeau et al., 2013; Yeager et al., 2011).

In addition to such technical issues, numerous studies try to test the substantive quality of online data: whether and to what extent can different effects of socio-demographic variables on political behaviour be observed? In general, there is consensus that marginal distributions of both socio-demographic characteristics and variables on political attitudes in online surveys differ significantly from those in traditional surveys (see Ansolabehere and Schaffner, 2014; Berrens et al., 2003; Chang and Krosnick, 2009; Faas and Schoen, 2006; Malhotra and Krosnick, 2007; Yeager et al., 2011). However, the replication of such frequency distributions is not the primary interest of empirical electoral research. As already indicated, models of voting behaviour provide information about when certain voters with specific attitudes, opinions and behaviour patterns participate or do not participate in elections (“voter turnout”) and which parties they vote for on election day (“vote intention”). The focus is therefore on the study of relations between different characteristics. In this respect, research on online surveys has so far arrived at different conclusions. Bandilla et al. (2009) generally suggest that there are similar distributions with regard to political issues amongst respondents with a similar educational background in different survey modes. This means that people with similar socio-structural characteristics respond equally – no matter by which mode they were questioned. Faas and Schoen (2006) assume that participants in open online surveys have a stronger interest in the subject matter than participants in face-to-face surveys or

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