

LORE methodological note

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Does mentioning recruitment source in invitation emails affect participation and completion rates?

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ABSTRACT

Recruitment to online panels can be conducted in several ways. Using already running surveys is often a cost efficient way of reaching new panel members, but it also pose a potential legitimacy problem for panels if respondents do not recall that they have signed up for participation in another survey, which in turn might affect subsequent participation rates and completion rates. This note examines the effects of adding a reminder of recruitment occasion in the invitation email to a web survey on the participation and completion rates in two web surveys. The results show a positive effect of the source introduction on participation rate in study 2 that is statistically significant, but no such effect can be found in study 1. Comparing completion rates, a statistically significant negative effect of the source introduction is found in study 1 but not in study 2. The tentative interpretation of the results is that the different results from the two studies are an effect of the differences in sample compositions.

Introduction

When recruiting panel members to online panels via other surveys, it sometimes arise a challenge with respondents who do not remember how and why they have agreed to become a participating member of a panel. They forget the source to their panel recruitment and might think of the email invitation to the survey as spam, with lower participation rate as a consequence.

The recommended procedure for survey recruitment is to get a “double opt-in” from respondents; to get the respondent’s consent to participate in the panel in a first stage by for example ticking a box, followed by a second consent by responding positively to an email sent by the recruiting part, sometimes combined with profile data (AAPOR’s Report on Online Panels: 2010). While the procedure of double opt-in enhances the panel’s legitimacy, separating the recruitment phase from the survey completion phase increases the risk that potential respondents skip participation, when they cannot recall signing up in the first place.

Through an experimental design we test the effect of reminding respondents of the source of their panel recruitment, in order to find out if such a procedure has an effect on participation rates and completion rates.

Data

In collaboration with Aftonbladet, Sweden's largest evening newspaper, and Dutch Kieskompass, LORE developed an online election compass that was released on the web a month before the European Parliament Election in May 2014. In a voluntary web survey following the presentation of the results of the compass, respondents were requested to sign up for future participation in the Citizen Panel, a continuous online web panel run by LORE, covering general political and social themes. Of the respondents who answered the survey, over 5 600 agreed to participate in future surveys of the Citizen Panel.

For the first follow-up survey of the Citizen Panel, the respondents who agreed to participate were randomly assigned into one out of two groups. Half of the respondents got a regular introduction email inviting them to participate in a survey, and the other half got an introduction email where the respondents were also reminded that they had signed up for the Citizen Panel and agreed to participate in future surveys in connection with the Aftonbladet Election Compass (the two email versions are attached in the appendix).

Further, the recruited respondents from Aftonbladet were assigned to two different surveys, where the first survey had a general theme of political and societal content, and the second had an environmental theme. However, these different themes were not mentioned in the invite email and should therefore not be expected to affect any initial participation rate for that reason. The sample used for the environmental survey was pre-stratified on sex, education, age and small/large city in order to be more representative of the general population, whereas the other sample was not pre-stratified in any way. In general, the Citizen Panel has an overrepresentation of males, well-educated and politically interested respondents.

The first question is whether reminding respondents of their participation in the Aftonbladet election compass has any effect on participation rate, or not. In addition, does political interest and level of education condition such an effect? The second question is if reminding people of their recruitment source affects the rate of complete surveys (i.e. not including break-offs or partial responses), here also controlling for political interest and education level.

Results

The results show a statistically significant positive effect of a source reminding invitation email on participation rate in study 2. Looking in Table 1, the strongest effects of invitation emails are found among the pre-stratified sample in study 2, where the source introduction positively affects the participation rate with 6 percentage points, a statistically significant effect at the 99% confidence level (two-tailed pr-test). The effect of the source reminding email invitation is strongest among respondents with

low/medium education level and high political interest, with positive effects of 6.9 and 6.2 percentage points respectively, both statistically significant on the 99% confidence level.

Among the respondents with low political interest, the source introduction has a positive 5.1 percentage point effect, but this effect is not statistically significant. In study 2 the respondents with high education stand out from the other effects, as the source introduction does not seem to have any significant effect on their participation rate. The results for the well-educated in study 2 are in line with most of the results for respondents in study 1, where no statistically significant effects are found and the positive effect of the source introduction reaches at most 2 percentage points among the respondents with low political interest.

Table 1. Source reminder in introduction email's effect on participation rate (percent)

	Regular intro	Source intro	Difference	N (Regular)	N (Source)
Study 1	All	68.4	68.8	0.4	1,435 1,491
	Political interest low	60.7	62.7	2.0	239 276
	Political interest high	70.2	70.2	0.0	1,167 1,192
	Education low/medium	63.2	64.0	0.8	538 550
	Education high	72.0	71.7	-0.3	870 916
Study 2	All	64.2	70.2	6.0***	1,380 1,323
	Political interest low	61.5	66.6	5.1	312 290
	Political interest high	64.9	71.1	6.2**	1,061 1,029
	Education low/medium	62.2	69.1	6.9**	1,139 1,088
	Education high	73.9	75.3	1.4	241 235

Comments: ***=p<.001, **=p<.01, *=p<.05, two-tailed pr-test in Stata. n=numbers in parentheses

The tendency among the well-educated to be less susceptible to the source introduction than the rest seems to be consistent in study 1 as well; here the source introduction runs in the opposite direction with a small but negative effect on the participation rate among the well-educated, although as earlier mentioned, the difference is not statistically significant. The effects of the source reminding invitation are much stronger in study 2 than in study 1, which might be an effect of the different demographical composition in the sample, due to the pre-stratification of the sample.

Among the respondents who not only open the survey, but also complete the survey, in Table 2 we find that the source introduction has a slightly negative effect on completion rate among the respondents in study 1. Overall, 3.3 percentage points fewer respondents complete the survey when presented with the source introduction email invitation. Among the respondents with low political interest, the negative effect of source introduction is 7.6 percentage points and statistically significant, compared to an effect of -2.2 percentage points among the politically interested.

Table 2. Source reminder in introduction email's effect on completion rate among participants (percent)

		Regular intro	Source intro	Difference	N (Regular)	N (Source)
<i>Study 1</i>	All	95.3	92.0	-3.3**	1,435	1,491
	Political interest low	97.2	89.6	-7.6*	239	276
	Political interest high	95.0	92.8	-2.2	1,167	1,192
	Education low/medium	94.4	90.9	-3.5	538	550
	Education high	96.0	93.0	-3.0*	870	916
<i>Study 2</i>	All	89.6	89.1	-0.5	1,380	1,323
	Political interest low	90.1	88.1	-2.0	312	290
	Political interest high	89.6	89.3	-0.3	1,061	1,029
	Education low/medium	88.6	88.8	0.2	1,139	1,088
	Education high	93.8	90.4	-3.4	241	235

Comments: ***=p<.001, **=p<.01, *=p<.05, two-tailed pr-test in Stata. n=numbers in parentheses

The results for study 2 run in the same direction but with smaller effects and without statistical significance. At most, the well-educated respondents complete the survey 3.4 percentage points less often when the introduction email invitation mentions the source to the respondents' recruitment, but none of the results in study 2 are statistically significant.

Concluding remarks

To sum up, there is a positive effect of the source introduction on participation rate in study 2 that is statistically significant, but no such effect can be found in study 1. Comparing completion rates, a statistically significant negative effect of the source introduction is found in study 1 but not in study 2.

Comparing the effects of the source reminding introduction on both the participation rates in Table 1 and the completion rates in Table 2, the statistical significant effects of source introduction on participation rate in study 2 are shifted to the effects of source introduction on completion rate in study 1. One possible explanation to this could be the different demographical compositions of the two separate studies, as study 2 was based on a pre-stratified sample. In study 2, the source introduction would then help attract respondents who would not have participated without the extra reminder of their recruitment source, raising the overall participation rate. Notice that the participation rate for the regular introduction is lower in study 2 than in study 1, as can be seen in Table 1. Once these respondents in study 2 have opened the survey, the effect of the source mentioning loses its effect, as can be seen in the close to zero-effects on the completion rate in Table 2.

For study 1 though, this initial effect of the source introduction is close to zero when it comes to the participation rate, i.e. the respondents who receives a reminder of their recruitment occasion open the survey to the same extent as others. However, they do drop

out to a greater extent without completing the survey, which is illustrated by the negative effects of source introduction on completion rate in study 1, found in Table 2. Our tentative interpretation of these results is that the different results from the two studies are an effect of the differences in sample compositions.

Appendix

Regular invite email:

Hej!

Här kommer nästa steg av Medborgarpanelen från Göteborgs universitet. Undersökningen innehåller en blandning av aktuella frågor, åsikter och attityder. Alla som deltar i undersökningen får inte alltid exakt samma frågor utan detta avgörs delvis av slumpen. Dina svar är lika viktiga för oss oavsett hur intresserad du är av samhällsfrågor!

Du kommer till undersökningen via följande länk:

[Till Medborgarpanelen](#)

Source reminding invite email:

Hej!

I samband med Aftonbladets valkompass inför Europaparlamentsvalet för en tid sedan anmälde du dig till Medborgarpanelen vid Göteborgs universitet. Här kommer nu första steget med en undersökning som innehåller en blandning av aktuella frågor, åsikter och attityder. Alla som deltar i undersökningen får inte alltid exakt samma frågor, utan detta avgörs delvis av slumpen. Dina svar är lika viktiga för oss oavsett hur intresserad du är av samhällsfrågor!

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The Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORE) is an academic web survey center located at the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg. LORE was established in 2010 as part of an initiative to strengthen multidisciplinary research on opinion and democracy. The objective of the Laboratory of Opinion Research is to facilitate for social scientists to conduct web survey experiments, collect panel data, and to contribute to methodological development. For more information, please contact us at:

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