

The SOM Institute's Notes on Survey Methodology – 2025:5

A Simple Invitation – The Effect of Simpler Language in Recruitment Letters on Joining a Probability- Based Web Panel

Alexandra Garcia Nilsson
The SOM Institute
Alexandra.garcia.nilsson@gu.se

Felix Cassel
The SOM Institute
Felix.cassel@gu.se

ABSTRACT

This note presents findings from an experiment examining how simpler language in a recruitment letter may influence the likelihood of joining a probability-based web panel. A total of 18,093 individuals were randomly assigned to receive either a standard or simplified recruitment letter in a recruitment to the Swedish Citizen Panel (SCP). We posited that the simplified letter would appeal more to individuals with lower language proficiency, e.g., with lower education or born abroad. Contrary to expectations, results demonstrate that individuals who received the standard recruitment letter were more likely to be recruited than those who received the simplified version.

INTRODUCTION

Survey researchers are constantly looking for ways to increase panel recruitment rates, particularly among groups that are difficult to recruit and retain, for example those with lower levels of education and those born abroad. Using simple and clear language, such as avoiding words with many syllables, unnecessary technical jargon or overly formal wording, is essential in communication with panelists (Song & Schwarz, 2008). The idea is that simplified language may be especially helpful for some hard-to-reach groups, without necessarily affecting engagement among other participants negatively.

This note presents findings from an experiment examining how simpler language in a recruitment letter affects the likelihood of joining a probability-based web panel. In the experiment, 18,093 individuals were randomly assigned to receive either the standard recruitment letter or a simplified in a recruitment to the Swedish Citizen Panel (SCP). We conjectured that the simpler invitation letter would be more appealing, and especially so to those with lower language proficiency, namely those with lower levels of education and those born abroad.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

Individuals invited to join the SCP were randomly assigned to either a control group, receiving the standard recruitment letter, or an experimental group, receiving a simplified version of the letter. The primary objective of the experiment was to examine whether there was a significant difference in the recruitment rate between the experimental groups. An individual was considered recruited if they opened the survey by logging in to the web page, either with login credentials or by scanning a QR-code on the recruitment letter, and entering their email address.

To assess the effect of the simplified recruitment letter on groups with lower language proficiency, the differences in the experimental effects were compared between people with lower and higher education, and between those born outside Sweden and those born in Sweden.

A secondary outcome was to compare the extent to which recruited individuals in the experimental groups completed the recruitment survey, in which the respondents left their email address for future survey invitations and answered some background questions. A questionnaire was considered complete if at least 80 percent of the questions were answered.

SAMPLE AND RECRUITMENT PROCESS

A total of 18,093 individuals were randomly assigned to receive either the standard recruitment letter (N=9,145) or a simplified version (N=8,948) during one of two regular recruitment periods for the Swedish Citizen Panel (SCP) in 2025 (January 7 – March 21). The recruitment process followed a minimal-effort approach, consisting of one postal invitation, one SMS reminder, and one postal reminder. The information in the SMS was identical for both experimental groups, and the postal reminder contained the same information as the postal invitation, with the exception of a sentence clarifying that the letter was a reminder. This reminder sentence was the same for both experimental groups. The sample was stratified based on combinations of sex, age, education, and whether the respondent was born inside or outside Sweden.

SIMPLIFICATIONS OF THE RECRUITMENT LETTER

The simplifications made to the recruitment letter primarily focused on reducing technical jargon, using generally simpler words, and choosing words with fewer syllables. For both versions of the letter, and the changes made between them, see Appendix.

Below are three example simplifications (translated from Swedish):

Standard recruitment letter	Simplified recruitment letter
Treated confidentially	Handled in a way that others cannot see your specific answers
Panel survey	Repeated survey
Once per quarter	Four times a year

The first two examples reflect terminology commonly used in the survey field, but which may be unclear to someone without prior knowledge of survey research. The third is a general phrase that has been expressed in a simpler and more accessible form.

LIX READABILITY INDEX

Maintaining all relevant information while simplifying the letters proved challenging, and as a result, the simplified version ended up longer, with 176 words compared to 156 in the standard letter. After all changes were made, both versions of the text were evaluated using LIX¹, the most commonly used readability index in Sweden. The index is calculated based on the average sentence length and the percentage of words containing more than six letters.

The simplified recruitment letter received a score of 38, which falls into the category “Easy to read, like fiction or popular magazines.”, while the standard letter scored 45, classified as “Moderately difficult, similar to typical newspaper text,” according to the LIX scale.

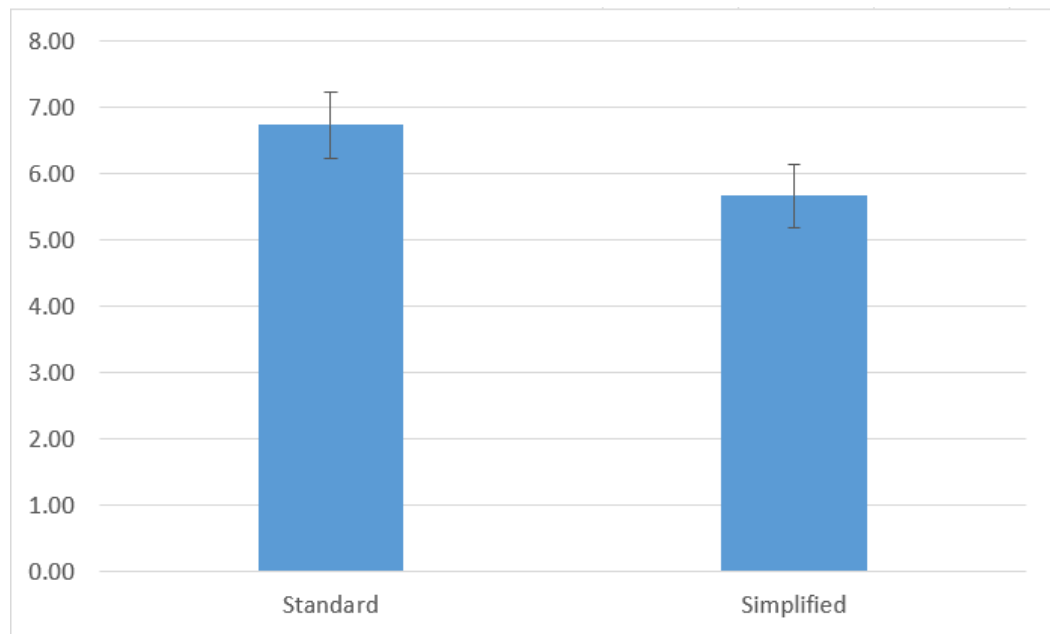
Score range	Description and examples
< 30	Very easy to read, typically for children’s books.
30 – 40	Easy to read, like fiction or popular magazines.
40 – 50	Moderately difficult, similar to normal newspaper text.
50 – 60	Difficult, typically used in official texts.
> 60	Very difficult, often used in bureaucratic language.

¹ <https://www.lix.se/>

RESULTS

There was a statistical significant difference between the treatment group and control group ($p < .01$). In the group that received the simplified recruitment letter, 5.66% were recruited to the SCP, compared to 6.73% in the group that received the standard letter (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Effect of recruitment letter on recruitment.



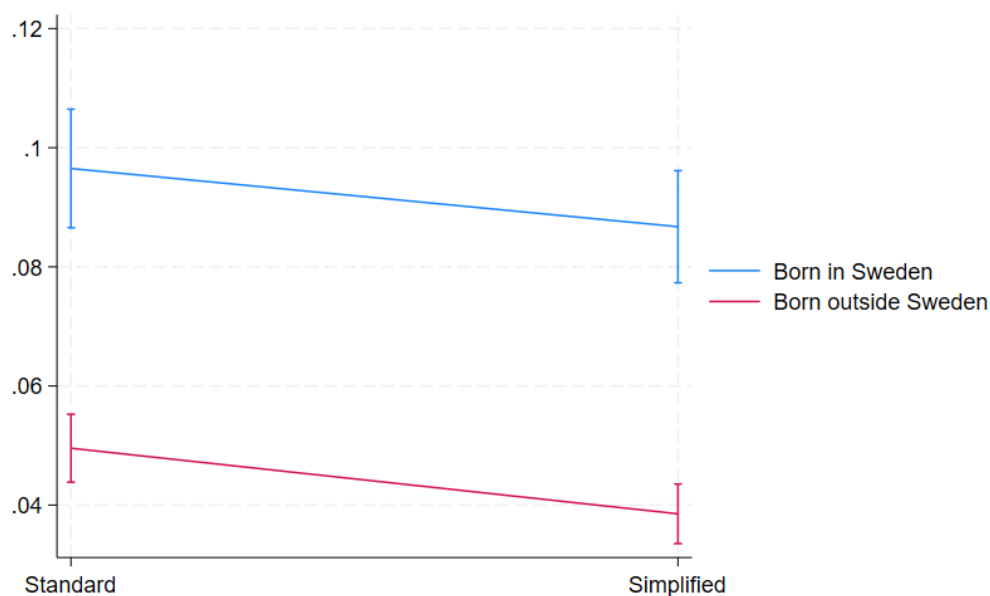
Note. Individuals who received the standard invitation letter were significantly more likely to be recruited than those who received the simplified version ($p < .01$).

RECRUITMENT IN GROUPS WITH LOWER LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

As expected, individuals born outside of Sweden were recruited at a lower rate than those born in Sweden, regardless of whether they received the standard or the simplified invitation letter (Figure 2). Notably, among individuals born outside of Sweden, the difference between the groups was statistically significant ($p < .01$, though in the opposite direction than expected – those who received the standard letter were more likely to be recruited than those who received the simplified letter. For individuals born in Sweden, the difference between the experimental groups was not statistically significant, yet a higher

recruitment rate was similarly observed among those who received the standard recruitment letter.

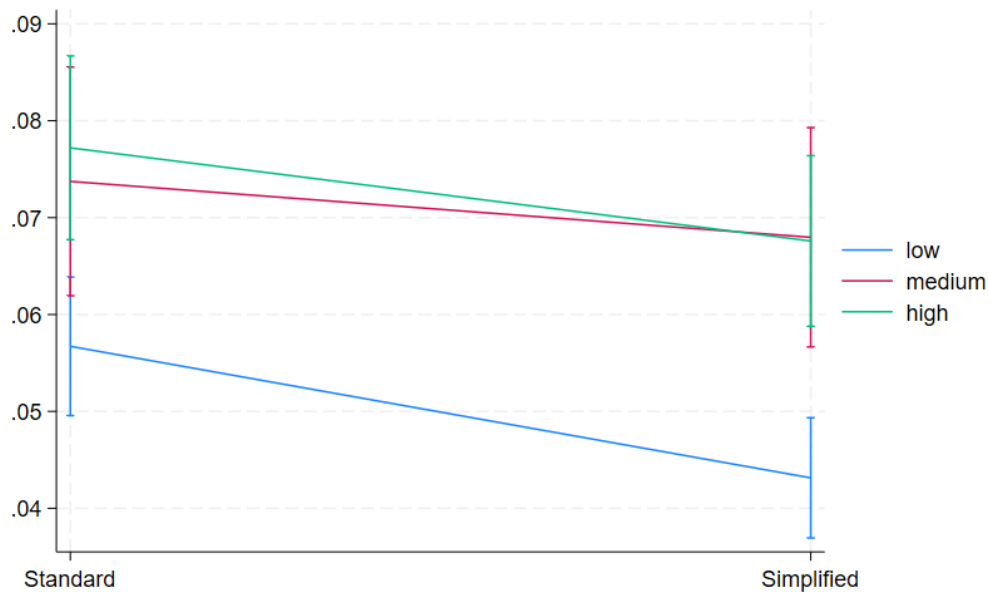
Figure 2. Effect of recruitment letter on recruitment, by country of birth



Note. For individuals born outside of Sweden, those who received the standard invitation letter were significantly more likely to be recruited than those who received the simplified version ($p < .01$).

As expected, individuals with lower levels of education were recruited at a lower rate than those with medium or higher education, regardless of the version of the invitation letter they received (Figure 3). Among those with low education, the difference between the groups was statistically significant ($p < .01$, but once again, the result ran opposite to our expectations – those receiving the standard letter were more likely to be recruited. For individuals with medium or high levels of education, no statistically significant difference was found between the groups, although the recruitment rate was slightly higher among those who received the standard letter.

Figure 3. Effect of recruitment letter on recruitment, by education.

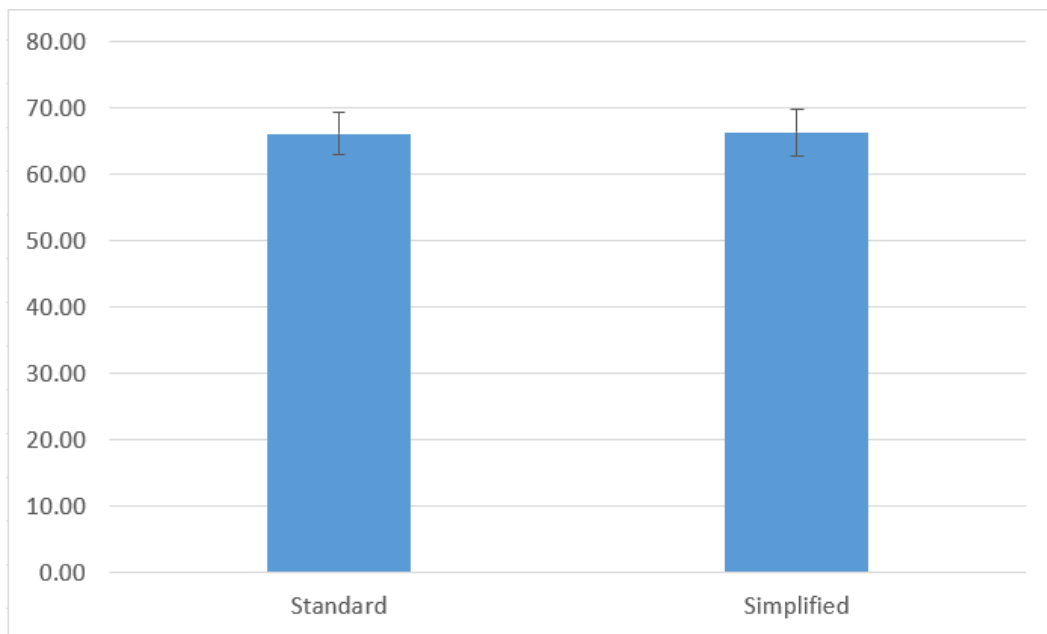


Note. For individuals with a low level of education, those who received the standard invitation letter were significantly more likely to be recruited than those who received the simplified version ($p < .01$).

COMPLETION OF RECRUITMENT SURVEY

Among the recruited panelists, there was no significant difference in completion rates between those receiving the standard and simplified recruitment letters, with 66% in both groups completing at least 80% of the recruitment survey (Figure 4). Nor were any statistically significant differences observed in subgroup analyses based on language proficiency.

Figure 4. Effect of recruitment letter on completion of recruitment survey.



Note. No significant differences were observed between groups receiving the standard or simplified invitation letter, with 66% in both groups completing at least 80% of the recruitment survey.

SUMMARY

This note reports findings from an experiment conducted in a postal recruitment to the Swedish Citizen Panel, in which the sample was randomly assigned to receive either the standard recruitment letter or a simplified recruitment letter. The main finding indicates that individuals who received a standard recruitment letter were more likely to be successfully recruited than those who received a simplified version. The effect was particularly strong among groups with lower language proficiency, namely the ones who had lower levels of education or were born abroad.

IMPLICATIONS

The somewhat unexpected results may partially be explained by the fact that respondents who received the simpler invitation letter were better informed about what they were signing up for, and – unfortunately – this made them less willing to participate. Another possible explanation is that a simpler language could potentially signal less credibility.

Further experiments focusing on elements in the invitation letters, such as the clarification that the survey will be repeated and how often, would be valuable. We also plan to conduct additional analyses on panelist engagement over the long term by investigating whether there is a higher dropout rate among those less informed about what they have signed up for.

REFERENCES

Song, H., & Schwarz, N. (2008). If It's Hard to Read, It's Hard to Do: Processing Fluency Affects Effort Prediction and Motivation: Processing Fluency Affects Effort Prediction and Motivation. *Psychological Science*, 19(10), 986-988. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02189.x>

APPENDIX

Figure A1. Standard invitation letter.

Inbjudan till att delta i SOM-institutets Medborgarpanel

Du har blivit utvald att delta i Medborgarpanelen, en panelundersökning från SOM-institutet vid Göteborgs universitet. Deltar du i Medborgarpanelen skickar vi enkäter till din e-post ungefär en gång i kvartalet och som du gärna får fylla i. Genom att besvara våra enkäter bidrar du till kunskap och forskning om människors åsikter och värderingar i Sverige.

Att delta i panelen är helt frivilligt och du kan när som helst sluta besvara enkäterna eller välja att gå ur panelen. Dina svar kommer att behandlas konfidentiellt. Din adress har vi fått från Statistikmyndigheten SCB som tagit fram ett urval av befolkningen åt oss. För mer information om undersökningen, se baksidan av detta brev.

Dina svar på våra frågor skulle hjälpa forskningen i Medborgarpanelen att representera de många olika åsikter och attityder som finns i Sverige.

För att komma till anmälan, skriv in webbadressen nedan i adressraden i din webbläsare eller skanna QR-koden i rutan under lösenordet med din mobilkamera.

Gå in på: www.gu.se/mp/anmalan

Anmäl dig med användaruppgifterna till höger om den blå pilen.

Du kan också skanna QR-koden till höger med din mobilkamera för att komma direkt till anmälan.

Användarnamn:
Lösenord:

Note. Invitation letter before any changes were made.

Figure A2. Simplified invitation letter.

Inbjudan till att gå med i SOM-institutets Medborgarpanel

Du har blivit utvald att **få gå med i** Medborgarpanelen, en **återkommande undersökning** från SOM-institutet vid Göteborgs universitet. **Går du med** i Medborgarpanelen skickar vi **frågor** till din e-post ungefär **fyra gånger per år** och som du gärna får **svara på**. Genom att **svara på våra frågor** bidrar du till kunskap och forskning om **vad människor i Sverige tycker och tänker**.

Att **gå med i panelen** är helt frivilligt och du kan när som helst sluta **svara på frågorna** eller välja att gå ur panelen. Dina svar kommer **hanteras så att andra inte kan se vad just du har svarat**. Din adress har vi fått från Statistikmyndigheten SCB som tagit fram ett urval av befolkningen åt oss. För mer information om undersökningen, se baksidan av detta brev.

Dina svar på våra frågor skulle hjälpa forskningen i Medborgarpanelen att **få med de många olika tankar och funderingar** som finns i Sverige.

För att komma till anmälan, skriv in **länken** nedan i adressraden i din webbläsare eller skanna **den svartvita koden** i rutan under lösenordet med din mobilkamera.

Gå in på: www.gu.se/mp/anmalan

Anmäl dig med
användaruppgifterna
till höger om den blå pilen.

**Du kan också skanna den
svartvita koden till höger med
din mobilkamera för att komma
direkt till anmälan.**

➔

Användarnamn:
Lösenord:

Note. Changes in comparison with standard letter marked in yellow.



The SOM Institute is an academic organization located at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Since 1986 the SOM Institute conducts annual cross-sectional surveys among the Swedish population with a focus on Society, Opinion, and Media, as well as administering the web panel called the Swedish Citizen Panel. The annual surveys and the web panel both function as infrastructures, enabling researchers and public organizations to effectively collect research and opinion data in collaboration with researchers at the SOM Institute.

In order to strengthen contemporary research on Swedish society, as well as to contribute to international methodological development, the SOM Institute frequently publishes notes on methodological research. These are made available for scholars and the public alike at <https://www.gu.se/en/som-institute/publications/research-on-survey-methodology>

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