

May 27, 1987

To: NES Board of Overseers
From: Giovanna Morchio
Concerning: Trends in NES Response Rates

The 1986 Post-election data collection had a goal of 2400 interviews. This assumed a 72% response rate, and that 87% of the sample addresses issued would prove to correspond to occupied households (i.e., would be eligible sample). The actual response rate was 67.7%. This, together with a sample eligibility rate of only 83.6%, led to a total production of only 2176 interviews. A shortfall of 224 interviews is cause for concern. Problems of estimating sample eligibility will be addressed in another memo. Here we are concerned with that portion of the shortfall which is due to the lower than expected response rate.

In order to be evaluated, a response rate of 67.7% needs to be placed in the perspective of response rates in other studies and past years. Is the 1986 response rate an aberration which we might expect to return to normal, or is it instead an indication of increasing and long-term difficulty in gaining respondent cooperation?

One such perspective is provided by Charlotte Steeh in her 1981 FOQ article, "Trends in Nonresponse Rates, 1952-1979." Steeh distinguishes between two kinds of non-response; refusals and no-contact. (Refusals, in Steeh's article as well as in our later discussion, are not just recalcitrant respondents, but those too ill, too senile or just "too busy" to participate.) Steeh's analysis of Election Study data, as well as Consumer Attitude Surveys, show a steady increase of refusals since 1952, while the level of no-contacts has remained virtually unchanged.

She also demonstrates a positive relationship between the increase in refusals and the level of urbanicity. The rate of increase in refusals for Self-representing SMSAs (the largest cities) is the highest, followed by SMSAs, with Non-SMSAs or rural areas showing the lowest rate of increase in refusals.

We have extended Steeh's analysis of NES data to include the years 1980 to 1986. (See Table 1, below). Unfortunately we do not have comparable urbanicity data for 1978. The lack of comparable 1978 data has the unfortunate consequence of not allowing us to compare the 1986 data, group by urbanicity of primary area, to a congressional election year data collection having a very similar overall response rate. (Steeh's discussion of NES response rates does not explicitly compare response rates in Presidential versus off-years; we think this may be important.)

TABLE 1

SAMPLE DISPOSITION BY URBANICITY OF PRIMARY AREA
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE % FOR THE YEAR AND THE AVERAGE FOR 78-86

	YR	INTERVIEWS*		REFUSALS		NO-CONTACT	
		%	DIFF	%	DIFF	%	DIFF
SELF REPRESENTING	86	63	0.5	29	1	8	-1.5
	84	60	-2.5	29	1	11	1.5
	82	64	1.5	29	1	7	-2.5
	80	63	0.5	25	-3	12	2.5
	Av	63		28		10	
SMSA	86	66	-4.25	27	3.75	7	0.75
	84	72	1.75	21	-2.25	6	-0.25
	82	70	-0.25	24	0.75	6	-0.25
	80	73	2.75	21	-2.25	6	-0.25
	Av	70		23		6	
NO SMSA	86	75	-4.75	20	5	5	0
	84	84	4.25	11	-4	5	0
	82	81	1.25	13	-2	5	0
	80	79	-0.75	16	1	5	0
	Av	80		15		5	
TOTAL RESPONSE RATE	86	68	-3	26	3.75	7	0.25
	84	72	1	21	-1.25	7	0.25
	82	72	1	21	-1.25	6	-0.75
	80	72	1	21	-1.25	7	0.25
	78	69	-2	23	1	9	2
	Av	71		22		7	

***INTERVIEWS is the equivalent of response rate, which is usually calculated as INT/INT+REF+NOCON, after non-sample addresses have been removed from the denominator.

In the 1980-1986 distribution of response rate for urbanicity groups (table 1), 1986 shows a 4% decrease in SMSAs and a 5% decrease for Non-SMSAs in relation to their historical average. Self-representing SMSAs show a response rate in 1986 almost identical to the four years average. The overall response rate for 1986 is 3% below the average for the four years.

Large variations in non-response are for the most part due to variations in the rate of refusals, with the rate of non-contact between remarkably stable over time, in all three categories.

Table 1 doesn't support the notion of an overall increase in non-response rate for years 1980 to 1986. Response rate seems to have stabilized around 63% in Self-representing SMSAs. SMSAs and Non-SMSAs show more variability year to year due in large extent to a sharp decline in response rate in both areas in 1986, but there is no evidence of steady decline from 1980 to 1986.

In 1986 and 1984, about one-quarter of the sample is in self-representing areas, another one-quarter in relatively rural areas, and the remaining one-quarter in SMSAs. While the biggest increase in refusal rates came from rural areas, what hurt us the most in terms of number of interviews was the 6% increase in refusals in SMSAs.

A related paper by John Brehm shows the impact of the drop in response rate on study bias. A later memo will try to sort out the many levels of explanations for this drop.