New Policy on Access to ANES Data
December 9, 2010

Background & Current Policy

The American National Election Studies has a longstanding commitment to serve a large community of scholars by providing high quality data to the public, free of charge, with equal access for everyone.

Successive ANES PIs have adopted a policy of "self-restriction" with respect to ANES data. That is, PIs use the data on the same terms as everyone else: by downloading the public data files from the ANES website. This practice is designed to ensure that the PIs do not have an unfair advantage over the rest of the political science profession, say, if they were to use the ANES data to get papers circulating and published ahead of other researchers. The current practice of "self-restriction" is consistent with the commitment stated above, in which ANES data is considered a public resource, and not the intellectual property of the PIs.

Consistent with the "self-restriction" policy, no ANES PI in recent years has seen an ANES data file prior to its public release. Responsibility for custody, formatting, editing, documentation, and review of the data files has been exclusively in the hands of ANES staff and data collection subcontractors under their supervision. The 2012 PIs have followed this practice.

Similarly, ANES Advisory Board members have been restricted from access to the surveys before they are public.

The Problem

The current practice of "no privileged data access" conflicts with other project goals: (1) holding PIs responsible and accountable for the quality of the work, (2) maximizing data quality over a cumulative, series of studies executed with a relatively high tempo, and (3) maximizing data quality by consulting experts.

1. Responsibility & accountability. The PIs have received a major grant from the National Science Foundation. In seeking NSF support the PIs pledged to deliver a high quality data product to the public. Yet, under the current policy, the PIs are prohibited from seeing the data prior to publication. Thus the PIs are responsible and accountable for the quality of the data that are made public, but they lack commensurate authority to see what is, in a sense, their own work product (if not their intellectual property). Without having seen the data files, it is impossible for the PIs to personally assure the quality of the work. We see a strong rationale for allowing PIs to see the preliminary data so that the PIs can directly participate in producing the data for which they are responsible.

2. Study tempo. One innovation under the current grant is a series of Internet surveys fielded at a much faster tempo than most prior ANES surveys. One of the chief purposes of these surveys is to evaluate instrumentation. The pace and experimental nature of the survey content creates a conundrum: the data need to be quickly analyzed so that informed design decisions can be made about the next survey, but PIs cannot personally perform the necessary data analysis if the data have not yet been publicly released.

We see a strong rationale for allowing the PIs to see the data so that the PIs can make timely assessments of innovations in instrumentation and questionnaire design, helping to inform decisions about successive study designs. Similarly, we see a strong rationale for allowing the Board to see those analyses so that the Board can provide timely and informed advice about successive study designs.

3. Experts. For the last four years the ANES staff has included researchers with PhDs in political science and allied disciplines. In addition to contributing to study design and project management, ANES staff work with the "in-house" data to assure quality and to prepare study documentation. This is an essential function of the project and it would be counterproductive to prohibit these PhD-level staff from handling the data. Graduate students at the host institutions also work with the data.

These PhD-level research staff and graduate assistants are political scientists with as much personal inventive as the PIs to make analytic use of the ANES data (though they have promised not to do so). Thus, the policy of "self-restriction" has not and cannot prevent all political scientists from gaining access to the data before they are public. That is, there is already a precedent for granting the PIs access to the preliminary data, since the ANES currently permits data access for staff (including PhD-level political scientists), out of necessity.

New Policy

We affirm our commitment not to use the ANES data for our own research before the data are public. We believe we can best maximize data quality if we amend details of the data access policy to allow PIs to make better-informed decisions. Accordingly, after consultation with the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the ANES Board, the following rules governing access to ANES data will now be in place.

Rule 1. No preferential access.
Until the data have been made public, absolutely no one may receive or use ANES data for any reason except to complete ANES project work. Definition: "ANES project work" means the full range of our NSF-funded activities involved in survey design, programming, testing, data collection, quality-control review, editing, documentation, and public release of data files and documentation. It does not include writing journal articles or answering non-methodological research questions in social science.

Rule 2. Data access for project work.
Only people who need access to the data to complete required ANES project work – namely, the PIs, staff (including paid student employees), and data collection subcontractors – may receive data prior to the data's public release. The purpose of this "pre-publication access" is strictly limited to ANES project work; no one is permitted to examine pre-release data files to write a paper intended for publication or for any other purpose not required by ANES project work.

Rule 3. Early access to other materials for project work.
Only people with a need, based on their duties to complete ANES project work, may receive data-related materials such as statistical tables or study documentation prior to the data's public release. Those with such a need consist of the PIs, staff, data collection contractors, and ANES Board members. Such materials shall be used for the sole purpose of completing ANES project work.

Rule 4. Publication/presentation embargo.

Except for the data files themselves and the associated documentation posted to the ANES website, ANES PIs and staff will not publish, submit, or present work based on ANES data until 60 days after said data have been released to the public. The embargo includes but is not limited to journal articles, books, book proposals, chapters, blogs, lectures, and conference presentations and proposals. "In-house" reports and presentations by PIs and ANES staff to the ANES Board and ANES public meetings constitute an exception to this rule.

Rule 5. Agreement to abide by this policy.

Each PI and staff member will sign a written commitment to abide by this policy prior to receiving any materials covered by the policy.

Rule 6. No early access to ANES Time Series data.

PIs shall not have access to ANES Time Series microdata before those data are public.

This change will allow the PIs, along with the ANES staff, to monitor data as they are collected to watch for warning signs of problems. As always, we are interested to know the views of others on such matters. If you have comments on this or related topics, please send a message to anes@electionstudies.org

Sincerely,
Gary Segura, Simon Jackman, and Vince Hutchings
ANES Principal Investigators