

American National Election Studies (ANES)
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Board Report

**The American National Elections Study as “Gold Standard”
for Survey Research in the Twenty-First Century**

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The American National Elections Study as “Gold Standard” for Survey Research in the Twenty-First Century: An Introduction

Goals of the ANES

The American National Election Studies (ANES) sets the “gold standard” in survey research.¹ The purpose of this report is to consider just what “setting the gold standard” might mean so that we can foresee just what needs to be done to ensure continuation of the ANES in this role. To do so, we first review the goals of the ANES and then assess the six components that we perceive to make up the standards for evaluating just what setting the gold standard means. This report is an introduction to a series of more detailed reports that are meant to address the question of how to have a viable, research frontier ANES that continues to be the gold standard in electoral survey research into the future.

The ANES began in 1948 with the first, if small but full, national, random-probability-based public opinion survey focusing on the national election. Its original leader, Prof. Angus Campbell along with others, then conducted a large, probability-based-sample, national election study in 1952, and this has continued in every presidential election since then. These have been supplemented by additional surveys in many of the midterm, congressional election years and a

¹ Sources as diverse as an NSF review panel and Wikipedia refer to it in that fashion, or as Wikipedia put it, “The consistency of the studies, asking the same questions repeatedly over time, makes it very useful for academic research with the result that it is frequently cited in works of [political science](#). Early ANES data were the basis for [The American Voter](#) (1960). Now ANES data are used by numerous scholars, students, and journalists. It is widely considered the “gold standard” of election studies.”
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_National_Election_Studies.

variety of pilot, experimental, and other surveys, including a number of up-to-four-year-long panel designs.

These surveys are designed around two focal goals and four other, major goals. The first focal goal focuses on the citizens. The questions are what factors promote or inhibit the citizen from turning out to vote in the election,² and what factors influence the choices voters make between or among the various parties and candidates.³

The second focal goal concerns the electorate as a whole, seeking to understand the public's collective role in campaign and elections. In seeking to achieve this goal, the purpose is to understand just who does the electorate choose to lend its sovereign powers to in office, "for limited duration and during good behavior" as Madison wrote, that is, to seek to understand the role of the "great body of the people" in making American democracy work. This goal imposes a special constraint on the ANES, as it requires the ability to make scientifically justified statements about the national body politic, acting as a collective body as a whole, and not just as a collection of individual decision makers.

Together, these can be defined as the micro- and the macro-perspectives on electoral democracy. The single most famous product of the original research team, *The American Voter* (1960), was centered on addressing what the 1952 and especially 1956 surveys had to say about the first focal goal. A good number of individual articles, many included in their second major work, *Elections and the Political Order* (1966), addressed the second focal goal (e.g., Converse's chapter on the normal vote; Campbell's on surge and decline; Stokes and Iversen's on forces

² These factors may be internal to the individual, or external such as changes in institutional features and rules, candidate campaigns, or the like.

³ These factors may also be internal or external to the individual, perhaps the same as helpful in understanding turnout, perhaps novel factors.

restoring party competition; and Stokes and Miller's on party government). These two focal goals align with additional goals.

The third central goal takes advantage of the fact, unique to American presidential elections, that this is the one certain moment every four years in which every eligible citizen makes a choice over the same alternatives at the same time as everyone else. This provides the unique ability to understand how people gather and process information and make choices in a way that virtually no other study can address. As a result, understanding individual information processing and decision making has attracted scholars from a wide variety of disciplines in the social and behavioral sciences.⁴ The use of the ANES attracts one of, if not the single, most interdisciplinary user communities in the world. This is, in effect, the generalization of the turnout and vote choice decisions to a larger array of individual choices and the attitudes, beliefs, and values that underlie them.⁵

The fourth central goal is the one that flows from using the national sample to understand the great body of the people acting as a collectivity, and also attracts an interdisciplinary research community. As we near the seventy year mark for the ANES, we have the virtue of a common research design and common core measurement instrument to study dynamics of public opinion and collective action over an increasingly long historical sweep, nearly 30% of US electoral history. This "time series" is unprecedented in its breadth of questions, length of time, and

⁴ That is to say scholars within this large collection of disciplines and beyond those disciplines and even beyond researching scholars to teachers, journalists, policy activists, and politicians and bureaucrats.

⁵ In this way, the common timing of choice more broadly construed reinforces the goals of a second, recurring, "gold standard" level national survey, the General Social Survey (GSS), in effect, the extension of the ANES to concerns in sociology and other social and behavioral sciences, applied outside of elections. The GSS is also NSF funded and began its regular surveying in 1972. An important question is whether the ANES and GSS have been able to achieve the maximum collectively, that is, if there are gains to be made from closer cooperation.

commonality of research design and instrumentation.⁶ From this, an understanding of historical dynamics is only now really becoming fully possible.⁷ Note that this historical dynamic includes the as-yet-to-be-fully-exploited ability to study the effects of institutional variation, such as nomination systems, campaign finance regimes, registration and voting rules, and external changes in politics and society, such as the full effects of elimination of Jim Crow laws, of the polarization of elite politics, immigration patterns, etc. This is in effect the generalization of the second focal goal to study the dynamics of the electorate as a collective body over varying social, political, and economic contexts and varying institutional and technological settings.⁸

Elections included in the ANES begin in 1948, the first post-election presidential election. It was also the first presidential election since the birth of the very first members of the baby boom generation (the standard range of the baby boom generation is 1946 – 1964). That generation has therefore been raised, that is socialized politically, entirely during the ANES period and is now entering their eighth decade and beginning to leave the electorate. So we have a nearly complete political history of what was, until recently, America's largest generation.

A fifth goal flows from the fourth. The U.S. has long been at the center of a number of major advances in survey research around the world. Many other nations looked to the U.S. as they (as a government or as a set of scholars) implemented their national election studies. The closeness of the ANES and its scholars to the development of the British National Election Study as one of the earliest to develop a serious and continuing set of national elections studies, is

⁶ The questionnaire used in the face-to-face national random sample, conducted as a pre-, post- panel design is referred to as the "time series" survey.

⁷ See, for example, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002, who, as they themselves note, essentially fully exhausted the then available time series data, making estimation possible but precarious. It is now only modestly less precarious but equally presenting slightly richer opportunities.

⁸ In this way, the ANES aligns with the NSF-sponsored CSES, which adds cross sectional variation across democracies around the world (along with a growing time component) to the within-system but over time, historical variation of the ANES.

evident (most especially in Butler and Stokes, 1969), but the debt owed to the ANES by all, even currently developing national election studies, is deep and real. Even more, it has been a force in the development of comparative survey research. The most evident example is the now-quarter of a century long run of the Comparative Study of Electoral System (CSES), the largest and most important truly comparative study of democratic politics around the world. It was formed in light of a talk given by the then PI of the ANES, Steven Rosenstone, and has been funded in whole or part by the NSF, just like it funds the ANES. The ANES has always included the CSES module as part of its study, and it continues to play a leadership role in the project.⁹ The central purpose of the CSES is a direct generalization of the focal goals of the ANES, and also, and especially, of the goal of understanding the role played by different electoral and party systems and the rules and institutions that make them up in the performance of democracy around the world. Some form of ANES must continue to buttress the goals of the CSES, let alone continue to influence the study of democracy more generally around the world.¹⁰

The final, but by no means least important, central goal is that the ANES must be at the center of the highest quality science and engineering of survey research. Indeed, that it always does so in its actual implementation of the best scientific design and engineering of its instrumentation is what others usually mean when referring to it as setting the gold standard. But, in addition, the ANES can be so only as long as it gathers together the best scientists and engineers in developing and implementing the newest and best methods for conducting survey research. This has been true since the early years of the project, in which, for example, the

⁹ As , for example, it is currently the case that the current chair of the CSES Planning Committee as of this writing is also the current chair of the ANES Board of Advisors.

¹⁰ More could be said about the potential for synchronization of goals and means of achieving them between the ANES and GSS as well. The design of the third of the NSF major social science projects, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) is of such a different research design and purpose that it is harder to imagine collaborative gains – harder but not impossible.

statistician Leslie Kish developed the sampling inference results that justified the multi-stage cluster sampling design that still defines the current backbone of the ANES study design, and it promises to continue to be true, even if (or perhaps especially if) the research design changes dramatically.¹¹ We could say that setting the gold standard in survey research and methodology is set in the context of (and perhaps under the constraints induced by) the five other major goals of the ANES.

Setting a Gold Standard in Implementing the ANES

With these six goals in mind, what might “setting the gold standard” mean, based on a core definition of by “gold standard” we mean “achieves one or more of the above list of objectives at the highest state of scientific accomplishment”? Each goal implies at least slightly different standards for judging if it is achieving that goal at the realistically highest imaginable standard. Collectively approximating them as fully as possible explains the rather high cost of the survey, in time, in intellectual capital, and in sheer dollars. It is at least possible that these best practices may conflict with one another, perhaps most easily understood when thinking about the time required of respondents, addressing questions pertinent to understanding turnout and the vote choice in the immediate election, maintaining the core of questions to continue to make time series analysis of the surveys viable, and accommodating the largest possible of variety of original scientific ideas in the social and behavioral sciences concerning individual

¹¹ Perhaps the research design will move back toward a more nearly simple random sampling design with on-line implementation as at least part of its core as being studied in both the 2012 and 2016 implementations of the ANES.

decision making. One of the most difficult tasks of the PIs at any given moment is how to balance the tradeoffs implied in achieving these goals.¹²

The Social and Behavioral Scientific Research Community: The first leg on which any claim to gold standard status must rest is the active engagement of the widest and richest set of the scientifically most significant scholars and practitioners of survey research. It was essentially just good fortune that Angus Campbell and the team he developed were of such high quality, and in addition to Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, it was their good judgment that enabled them to reach out to a (much smaller than today) group of established or, often, emerging experts. For the 1978 study and, so far, every study since then, the team was able to receive NSF funding.¹³ One thing this meant was that each round of funding included peer review, one important mechanism for including expertise. And, at least from time to time, the NSF conducted open calls for competitive bidding for the project, thus opening the range of ideas and opportunities still further to intellectual competition. With NSF funding came the creation of a Board. This Board not only greatly expanded the near-to hands on expertise but provided an important link between the PIs and the NSF and thus to the larger user community.

The PIs have reached further outward. Originally, this included a call for proposals for innovative ideas, generally around a particular topic, invitation of authors of the most interesting of these proposals to a conference and a chance to design instrumentation (or innovations in other aspects) in national pilot projects and then, perhaps, onto the regular survey itself. Perhaps the clearest example was that the PIs effectively gave over the entire survey in 1978 to experts

¹² We might also well imagine that one of the motivations for seeking to become a PI is to be able to do original science about elections at the highest level of quality.

¹³ Actually, the 2002 congressional study was not. The social and Behavioral Research Community (especially the PIs and Advisory Board) were able to raise funding for it, but from the return of NSF funding of the 2004 ANES onward, such funding is not available for “midterm” congressional election studies.

on congressional elections, changing the survey design as well as its instrumentation.¹⁴

Afterwards, there were similar “special” surveys (e.g., concerning presidential nominations in the 1980s, and a three period panel to study voting for the Senate, 1988-1992, to match a complete cycle of Senate elections). In addition, the innovations resulting from this procedure in terms of survey instrumentation from 1980 onward greatly shaped the core questionnaire of the standard “times series” (that is, pre- and post-election) presidential year surveys as well. The current “core” questions include a very large share of questions that emerged from this outreach to the user community at large. In the 2008 round, the PIs created the On Line Commons as a more modern vehicle for generating ideas drawn from the widest possible set of sources in the user community.

Any new project must include due attention to innovation and input generally from the user community. It is quite possible to imagine different designs for, say, the role of the Board, or similar body. And, with such dramatic change in communication technologies, it is easy to look at the 2008 incarnation of the On Line Commons as primitive by today’s technological standards, and perceive a variety of possible innovations that will draw more effectively from the largest variety of input of ideas, innovations, and feedback. All of these should be seen as advances on the long-established ideal that the ANES is a collective enterprise, a common pool resource of a worldwide actual or potential user community. Further, while the PIs are the final decision makers in determining the science of that year’s project, they should be understood as the carriers of the gold standard in survey research, “owned” by the widest possible user community, one that should have both input in to the design of the current project and at least

¹⁴ In particular, the 1978 sample frame was based on congressional districts, so that inferences could be made on that basis. This design was used in the 1980 “time series” surveys as well. That and the fact that a few time series surveys were not “fresh” cross sectional samples but (refreshed) third waves of panels were the major “interruptions” in sampling framework for the time series surveys.

retrospective peer review (in a very general sense) over the full set of decisions that went into that round of new science.

The Research Design: The quality of science that flows from any project is shaped to a very large degree by the quality of the research design that underlies it. Seeking to create research frontier research designs, in one or many other dimensions of this complex project, is the purpose of the following reports. This introductory report closes with a few final thoughts on the challenges that face survey research and do so in the immediate future. One of the major challenges facing survey research in the second quarter of the twenty-first century will be how to achieve the macro-inferences for the study of the electorate as collective actor (and related goals) at the level of scientific success that was found in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Achieving a high response rate in a financially viable probability-based survey seemed to require “only” the tradeoff of money. Spend enough to recruit and train high quality surveyors to ensure high compliance with face-to-face interviewing. Get a well-developed cluster sample design. Spend the time and effort to convert the drawn sample into completed surveys (e.g., up to 18 call-backs as was once the procedure employed to meet this standard of quality). With the willingness to spend the money, meeting this level of gold standard could be met.

In the intervening years, conditions that underpinned this level of success have eroded. It is harder to contact the set of cases drawn, it is (much) harder to convert those contacted to actual respondents. It is harder to get compliance with such a long survey – two long surveys, to be more exact. And there are new opportunities. It is no longer obvious that relying exclusively on face-to-face interviewing is the best practice. If that is changed, then new research designs that are at least somewhat closer to simple random surveys – that is, sample designs that are not as tightly clustered and thus can provide larger variation at least geographically and likely in many

other ways, becomes possible. Known problems associated with exclusive reliance on face to face interviews can be surmounted. At least those are the aspirations of the optimistic. But sample design is merely one of the challenges facing survey research.

Fortunately, there are also opportunities. One example has been the oversampling of critical groups that make up a relatively small proportion of an electorate, and hence of a gold quality sample. Minorities have been the focus often. There are obviously opportunities for other “additions” to a gold standard sample for well-specified purposes. Virtually all surveys of any quality today are actually recorded directly into a laptop, tablet, phone, or other sort of computer, even if it is a face-to-face survey. This development has opened a number of possibilities for pushing out the research frontier of surveys. The ANES is able to get more and more accurate responses from respondents about sensitive topics (including income and race, but also gender identity, and so on) or even be able to ask some kinds of questions at all, by having the interviewer step aside so that the respondent can enter in private responses to potentially sensitive questions. An NSF funded special survey for ANES in the 2008 cycle was able to use its computer base as a means for taking an on-line test to measure implicit attitudes about race that was unimaginable if we were still in the IBM-card-mainframe era. The full range of opportunities for taking advantage of computer-assisted interviewing (regardless of mode of interviewing) has only begun to be exploited, especially in questionnaire design. Similarly, only in the 2016 cycle has the design included the attempt to integrate ANES respondents with “big data” (in this case Facebook data), and only in recent cycles has turnout been “validated” with reference to “big data” versions of actual turnout reports.

Tradeoffs: The final point for this essay is that every advance of science in survey research that gets embedded in the ANES raises tradeoffs with other parts of the science of the

ANES! That is to say, that each question added to the survey itself, in a survey that is very tight of time, either comes at the expense of another worthy question or at the expense of asking just that much of the respondents and their time and patience. Similarly, for the PIs to, say, think deeply and engage the research community (perhaps meaning only the Advisory Board, perhaps meaning a much large community) is to drain time, staff effort, and support from doing something else. Should archiving be a priority, what gets reduced or eliminated? Will this changed wording of a long-asked topic weaken or destroy the time series on that item? And, there is a scientific imperative embedded in the idea of a new survey every presidential election. Justification of persistence requires new science every four years. PIs are selected base, at least in part, on that notion. They want to be PIs at all to add to the stock of scientific research and, even more, to advance it. While of course some in the user community are happy to have their survey topics of most interest repeated election after election, the user community also desires scientific progress through the ANES. That is to say that everyone can imagine multiple objectives of value for the ANES and therefore a gold standard that is multi-dimensional, likely with a “recency bias” toward new science and new explanation of events that transpire in November of election years (whichever goal that implicates). It is precisely because there are multiple objectives and because the ANES has so admirably filled these numerous objectives for so long that it is very difficult to remain at the research frontier on each leg of the multiple standards that make up the gold standard.

Toward the Future

This account sets the broad, most general principles that justify the ANES and help determine what it should be achieving if it is to remain the gold standard in survey research. Hard work and hard thinking must go into much more specific and well-defined aspects of the ANES as gold standard. The Board of Advisors has done just that on some selected topics – topics that may be only some of the possibilities, but are important and threatened for the ability of any survey to achieve the highest of standards. These reports are to accompany this overview.

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