

How to Survey About Electoral Turnout? Additional Evidence

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Post-election surveys measure voter turnout in a variety of ways. The Canadian Election Study (CES) simply asks respondents whether or not they voted. However, existing research shows that some abstainers report having voted when they in fact did not (Granberg and Holmberg, 1991; Selb and Munzert, 2013). If this misreporting is correlated with other traits, analysis based on the data can be biased. One possible solution to reduce the incentive to overreport is to reframe the turnout question.

The British Election Study presents respondents with a short preamble (SP) before asking them if they voted or not. Such SPs state that some people abstain at elections, and that they do so for a variety of reasons. No published study has ever tested if including a SP impacts on reported behavior. The CES fielded an experiment in its online survey following the 2015 federal election to answer this very question.

The survey was conducted by the firm Survey Sampling International (SSI). Small monetary incentives were used to encourage participation. Unfortunately, SSI's recruitment methods make it impossible to compute a response rate.¹ 7,557 Rs participated in the pre-election telephone survey, and 4,408 also completed the online post-election survey (attrition rate : 41.7%). A random half of Rs was exposed to a SP before being asked whether or not they voted (see [Table 1](#)). The SP mentions: “some people are not able to vote because they are sick or busy, or for some other reason. Others do not want to vote.” Experimental groups are balanced on observable characteristics. Non-response items are recoded as missing data ($\approx 2\%$).

The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available at the Journal of Experimental Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: doi:[10.7910/DVN/RHPOYR](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/RHPOYR). Thanks to Semra Sevi, Alexandre Blanchet, Eric Lachapelle, Damien Bol, Laura Stephenson, and anonymous referees for comments and suggestions.

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¹See appendix and Breton et al. (2017) for explanations.

Table 1
Experimental Conditions in the Short Preamble Experiment

Component	Control condition	Treatment condition
Preamble	(None)	The federal election was held on Monday, October 19. In any election, some people are not able to vote because they are sick or busy, or for some other reason. Others do not want to vote.
Question	Did you vote in the election?	Did you vote in the recent federal election?
Response options	(1) Yes (2) No (3) Don't know (4) Refuse to answer	(1) Yes (2) No (3) Don't know (4) Refuse to answer

Table 2
Results for the Short Preamble Experiment

	Control group (without short preamble)		Treatment group (with short preamble)		Difference in percentage points	<i>p</i> -value
	<i>N</i>	% Voted	<i>N</i>	% Voted		
Disabilities: Yes	339	89.1	287	83.3	-5.8	0.034
Disabilities: No	1,771	87.9	1,797	87.7	-0.2	0.845
All sample	2,188	87.9	2,146	87.0	-0.9	0.377

Table 3
Experimental Conditions in the Face-Saving Response Items Experiment

Component	Control condition	Treatment condition
Preamble	In each election, we found that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were not registered, they were sick, or they did not have time.	In each election we found that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were not registered, they were sick, or they did not have time.
Question	Were you personally able to vote in this election?	Which of the following statements best describes you?
Response options	(1) Yes (2) No (3) Don't know/prefer not to answer	(1) I did not vote in the election (2) I thought about voting this time but didn't (3) I usually vote but didn't this time (4) I am sure I voted in the election (5) Don't know/prefer not to answer

Table 2 presents the results. Subgroup analyses show that the SP reduces reported turnout among people with disabilities (-5.8 percentage points). However, this effect is largely diluted when all Rs are combined. In the whole sample, reported

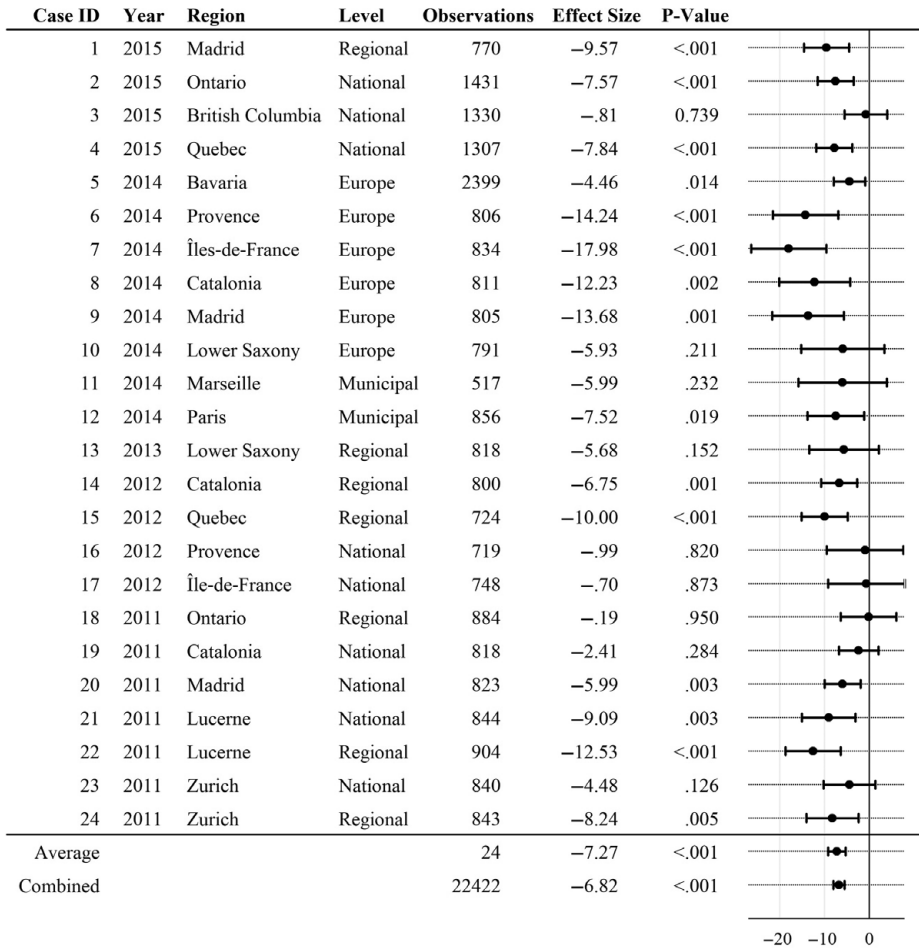


Figure 1

Using Face-Saving Response Items to Reduce Vote Overreporting: Effects Measured in the 24 Survey Experiments Fielded as Part of the Making Electoral Democracy Works Project (95% CI).

turnout is 87.9% in the control group, against 87.0% in the treatment group. This difference is not statistically significant.²

The American National Election Studies measure voter turnout using a different approach: they combine a SP with face-saving response items (FSRIs). FSRIs allow respondents to report that they abstained while simultaneously justifying why they did not vote (Duff et al., 2007; Belli et al., 2006).

²Actual turnout for this election: 68.3%. Additional information in appendix.

In a recent publication, Morin-Chassé et al. (2017) present the results of 19 experiments testing the efficacy of replacing yes or no options with FSRI (see Table 3). In Figure 1, Case IDs 1 to 5 present five additional experiments fielded as part of the same project.³ The lines below report the same results as those published before by Morin-Chassé et al. Finally, the two bottom lines present cumulative effect estimates. The first is the average effect size of (−7.27 pp); the second is based on the combination of all individual survey responses (−6.82 pp).

Overall, the findings reported in this Short Report suggest that combining a SP with FSRI is a valuable approach to reduce vote overreporting. The main limitation of these experiments is the impossibility to validate self-report data with official voting records.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The appendix is available online as supplementary material at <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2018.1>

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³Additional information in appendix.