In-person Mobilization of Survey Respondents Reduces Overrepresentation of Socially Desirable Voting Behaviour

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Abstract

Although actual turnout rates are declining in many Western European Democracies, large-scale survey projects tend to measure higher turnout rates year by year. Some turnout rates being measured even in high-quality methodological settings exceed 90 per cent and more, leaving non-voters underrepresented. Similar patterns are observed for voters of right-wing parties. This overestimation of certain, sometimes socially desirable measures is mostly explained by unit-nonresponse. Non-voters and right-wing party supporters don't make it into survey samples. This failure of sampling techniques has two major consequences. (1) Descriptive statistics from survey estimates that go beyond administrative data can no longer be trusted and (2) multivariate models don't work due to skew distributions of dependent variables. Weighting procedures can not correct for these issues. This report shows how two surveys of immigrant-origin voters, the IMGES I & II performed in measuring often overreported survey items. The IMGES I revealed much lower turnout estimates than the national GLES which it was synchronized with. However, we cannot test whether these are actual differences or if the two populations differ in response behaviour. The IMGES II fieldwork data has the potential to answer this question. Our implementation of an in-person canvassing strategy reveals strong differences between respondents who were mobilized into the survey by visiting them at home and and those who were only postally invited. Recruiting respondents with targeted measures that are often avoided on a full scale due to their high cost, can help activating underrepresented survey respondents.

Keywords: turnout, voters, overestimation, overreporting, overrepresentation, survey, in-person contact, IMGES

Overrepresentation of Socially Desirable Voting Behaviour

Many large-scale electoral survey projects carried out in Western European polities suffer from increasing problems with an overrepresentation of turnout and an underrepresentation of voters for radical right parties (Karp & Brockington 2005, Thomas et al. 2017). In some studies, these issues are discussed as a consequence of misreporting (e.g. Karp & Brockington 2005), while others emphasize nonresponse bias as a decisive reason for distorted turnout estimates (Sciarini & Goldberg 2017). Dahlgaard et al. (2019), Jackman and Spahn (2018) demonstrate the shares by which both problems contribute to the overestimation of turnout.

While techniques have been tested to improve survey questionnaires and reduce overreporting (e.g. Duff et al. 2007), reducing non-response bias usually leads to higher costs and more need for staff and survey infrastructure depending on the survey mode. The underrepresentation of voter groups such as non-voters or radical right party voters requires techniques to mobilize hard-to-survey populations into survey participation (Tourangeau 2014, Haan et al. 2014). In order to use such techniques cost-efficiently, new methods for fieldwork are needed.

This paper discusses overestimation in two surveys among immigrant-origin populations surveyed in the Immigrant German Election Study I 2017 (IMGES I) and Immigrant German Election Study II from 2021 (IMGES II). Expecting lower response rates among these hard-to-survey populations we implemented an in-person canvassing strategy in the IMGES II (Elis et al. 2023). Mobilizing randomly selected target-persons into the survey by visiting them at home instead of postally reminding them lead to significantly higher participation rates. Beyond that, and most importantly with regard to the problem of overrepresentation, respondents who were treated with in-person canvassing differ significantly from the rest of the sample. Not only do they show lower reported turnout and radical-right party preferences in favour of the Alternative of Germany (AfD). These side effects of the in-person canvassing strategy also last over a screening wave and all stages of the three-wave longitudinal survey of the IMGES II.

However, in-person canvassing can be way more expensive compared to online or postal invitations, take additional personal resources and require careful consideration in weighting procedures. Consequently, this paper suggests two ways of a targeted implementations of in-person canvassing including a model-based or theoretical selection of sampling points or areas.

Turnout Overestimation in Two Surveys of Immigrant-origin Populations

Retrospective turnout measured in European electoral surveys has reached up to 95 per cent and more. Such a skew variable distribution is problematic in a number of ways. First of all, multivariate model of voting become unfeasible with no weighting strategy being able to overcome the problem. Secondly, even basic descriptive statistics of voter turnout in sub-populations become unreliable and lastly, general trust in surveys can be endangered in the long run.

Figure 1 shows the development of retrospective turnout rates (orange line) versus actual turnout rates (blue line) in three European electoral surveys from Denmark (Danish National Election Study), Germany (German Longitudinal Election Study) and the United Kingdom (British Election Study) since the year 2000. As we can see, overestimation of turnout is present at all points in time for all three studies. For Denmark and Germany, measured retrospective turnout rates even exceed 95 per cent with official turnout below 85 per cent and the gap has been widening recently.
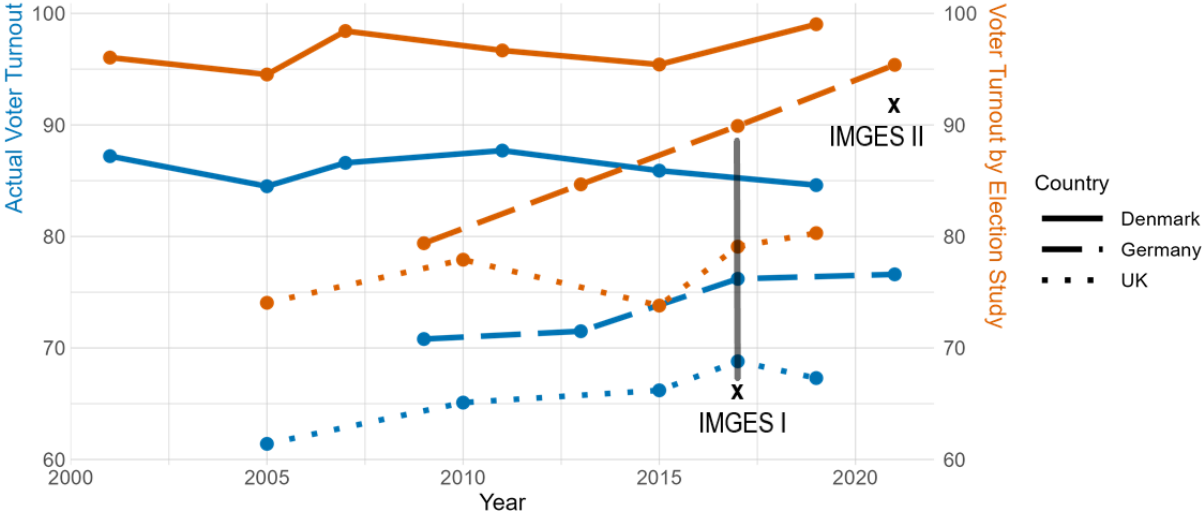

Figure 1: Development of Measured Retrospective and Actual Turnout Rates in Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom.

The reported retrospective turnout rates for the two sub-samples of the IMGES I 2017 (see Goerres et al. (2017) for details of the study) were 70 per cent for Turkish-origin voters and 64 per cent for Russian Germans. In Figure 1, the average measured turnout between both groups is shown. The German Longitudinal Election Study measured about 90 per cent of turnout for the whole German electorate using the same synchronized survey design. To an unknown extent, this notable difference can be explained by actually lower participation rates for immigrant-origin voters that are often observed in electoral surveys (Rapp 2020). However, it is unclear whether a potion of this difference occurs due to patterns of survey participation behaviour that are distinct for immigrant-origin voters.

The second survey we look at is the longitudinal IMGES II conducted during and after the 2021 German national election campaign in the Western German metropolis of Duisburg. The measured retrospective turnout in the third survey wave is about 92 per cent compared to about 68 per cent of actual turnout in the city (Stadt Duisburg 2021). Considering that actual turnout in Duisburg was more than 8 per cent below national turnout (Bundeswahlleiter 2021), the extent of voter overrepresentation is similar to the GLES 2021 estimate.

Due to the longitudinal survey design and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, an in-person canvassing strategy was implemented in the IMGES II reminder stage in order to increase response rates in the immigrant-origin sub-samples. While this proofed successful, it is of further interest whether personal contact to initial non-respondents also has an effect on the overrepresentation of socially desirable voting behaviour. The studies mentioned above provide evidence that non-response plays a crucial role in the extent of overreporting. The following section analyses the potential of in-person canvassing for reducing this source of bias using data from the IMGES II.

Differences in Socially Desirable Voting Behaviour Measures Over Contact Mode

We now turn to the effect of in-person canvassing versus postal reminders with regard to survey estimates of political interest, electoral participation as well as right-wing party vote. Political interest is a strong predictor of unit-nonresponse (see Appendix Table 1). We use data from the fieldwork of the IMGES II as well as survey data from its screening stage and three-wave longitudinal CATI survey. Detailed information on the overall data collection, the in-person canvassing strategy and data structure can be found in Elis et al. (2023) and Goerres et al. (2021).

Table 1 shows the bivariate comparison between the unweighted means of the three variable types that are prone to over- or underestimation due to social desirability. All reported values are displayed as the mean of the postally reminded group of respondents minus the mean for respondents who were reminded to take part in the IMGES II survey in person (columns highlighted in grey). The left-hand column shows differences on the original scale and the right-hand column shows standardized difference between 0 and 100 that can be interpreted as a difference in percentage points. For the two binomial variables, prospective turnout from the screening wave as well as retrospective turnout, both values are equal.

First of all, we can see a negative sign for all variables of political interest and voting behaviour. The one-sided Wald test is always significant. Looking at the survey wave from the screening to the third CATI wave, it turns out that effects of the in-person canvassing treatment last over time. Respondents who were treated in person show a lower self-reported political interest of almost half a scale-point on the five-point scale compared to the postally invited group. This value equals about 10 percentage points on the standardized 0 – 100 scale and remains relatively constant over the four survey stages for which the item is available.

We find the same favourable pattern for differences in the propensity-to-vote scale for the AfD. Respondents who were mobilized by in-person canvassing show a significantly higher propensity-to-vote for the populist right-wing party. The in-person canvassing strategy brings forward respondents with a four to eight percentage points higher propensity to vote for the AfD.

These results show that in-person canvassing has generated a sample of respondents who, on average, respond in a less socially desirable way. Besides the improvement of the overall response rate, this side effect is highly relevant for the development of strategies against overestimation of certain behaviours. Given the higher costs of this strategy compared to postal survey invitations, the last section will suggest options for a targeted implementation of in-person canavssing.

Table 1: Bivariate Comparison of Variable Means Between Postally Reminded and In-person Canvassing Group

Variable	Survey wave	Scale	Total number of observations	Δ Postal – In-person Canvassing		One-sided Wald test
				Unstandardized (orig. scale)	Standardized (0 – 100)	
Political interest	Screening	1 – 5	3,354	-0.39	-10	.000
Political interest	CATI 1	1 – 5	1,414	-0.45	-11	.000
Political interest	CATI 2	1 – 5	1,074	-0.41	-10	.000
Political interest	CATI 3	1 – 5	910	-0.45	-11	.000
Prospective turnout	Screening	Would vote vs. undecided, would not vote	3,354	-0.10	-10	.000
Prospective turnout	CATI 1	1 – 5	1,414	-0.39	-10	.000
Prospective turnout	CATI 2	1 – 5	1,074	-0.30	-7	.000
Retrospective turnout	CATI 3	Would vote vs. would not vote	910	-0.08	-8	.000
Propensity to vote AfD	CATI 1	0 - 10	1,414	0.43	4	.001
Propensity to vote AfD	CATI 2	0 - 10	1,074	0.76	8	.000
Propensity to vote AfD	CATI 3	0 - 10	910	0.70	7	.000

Possible Applications of In-person Canvassing for Future Electoral Surveys

As the above analyses have shown, there are substantive differences between respondents mobilized through in-person canvassing and postal reminders. However, the monetary cost per respondent mobilized through in-person contact is much higher. In-person contacts to target persons or households are generally more expensive where distances between them are larger, for example in more rural areas. The recruitment of personnel becomes more difficult the wider the territorial scope of a survey is. Given the limited resources of survey projects, it can be necessary to implement targeted strategies of in-person

canvassing that focus on areas with a higher estimated likelihood of (radical right) voter overrepresentation.

One possible option is a *model-based prediction* of sampling points, regions or areas where survey non-response is higher. Survey projects using register data as sampling frames can use all available information in connection with previous response outcomes to predict response rates. If, for example, a sampling point associated with higher social deprivation located in the rural periphery is estimated to have lower predicted response rates, researchers could treat target persons in the area with in-person canvassing. This targeted treatment can later serve as a variable used to improve weighting strategies.

The second option in which in-person canvassing can be used systematically is a *theoretical selection approach*. Survey projects could categorise and randomly select sampling points or areas covering theoretically interesting features that are associated with differences in response outcomes. Variables of interest include, for example, rural versus urban areas, population density or electoral turnout in previous elections. Sampling points or areas are first classified by such features. In a second step, a number of areas is treated with in-person canvassing allowing researchers to compare response outcomes with those from a similar, but untreated area. There are two outcomes that are useful in order to improve the quality of survey estimates. Firstly, a substantive number of target-persons is treated with in-person canvassing leading to higher response rates and more accurate measures of electoral behaviour. Secondly, knowledge about differences of outcomes between treated and untreated areas can systematically be used to calculate survey weights for the final sample.

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Appendix

Appendix Table 1: Nonresponse Model with Dependent Variable Survey Participation in CATI Wave 1 of the IMGES II Longitudinal Survey.