

# Advances in Survey Methods for the Developing World

Noam Lupu<sup>1</sup> and Kristin Michelitch<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA, 37203; email: noam.lupu@vanderbilt.edu

<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Science, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA, 37203; email: kristin.michelitch@vanderbilt.edu

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## Keywords

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## Abstract

More and more political scientists are fielding surveys in the developing world. Yet, most survey research methodology derives from experiences in developed countries. Researchers working in the developing world often confront very different challenges to collecting high-quality data. Census data may be unreliable or outdated, enumerators may shirk, political topics may be sensitive, and respondents may be unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with an interview format. In this article, we review both published methodological research and the best practices of scholars based on an original expert survey of survey researchers. We characterize the state of the field and provide insights about the range of available options when it comes to implementing surveys in the developing world. We examine innovations across many aspects of survey implementation, including sampling, enumeration, data collection, ethical considerations, and reporting. We also assess these practices and offer suggestions for future methodological inquiry and for greater research transparency.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

More and more political scientists are conducting survey research in the developing world. Cross-national barometer surveys have sprung up in every developing region (Heath et al. 2005; Smith 2015),<sup>1</sup> and developing countries are increasingly represented on global projects like the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and the World Values Survey. Individual researchers are also increasingly fielding original surveys across the developing world,<sup>2</sup> no doubt buoyed by decreasing costs and improvements in local capacity (see Zechmeister & Seligson 2012). Indeed, the number of articles published in the top political science journals in which authors field original surveys from the developing world has ballooned in the last decade (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

Yet, most survey research methodology derives from experiences in developed countries, particularly the United States. Researchers working in the developing world often confront very different challenges to collecting high-quality data.<sup>4</sup> For example, how do you sample in a country without reliable and up-to-date census data? How do you elicit opinions on national politics in closed societies or dangerous security environments? How do you deal with cultural norms regarding gender roles or hospitality in face-to-face surveys? How should researchers monitor enumerators? What kinds of ethical challenges do researchers need to consider?<sup>5</sup>

In this review article, we rely on three sources of information about these issues. As

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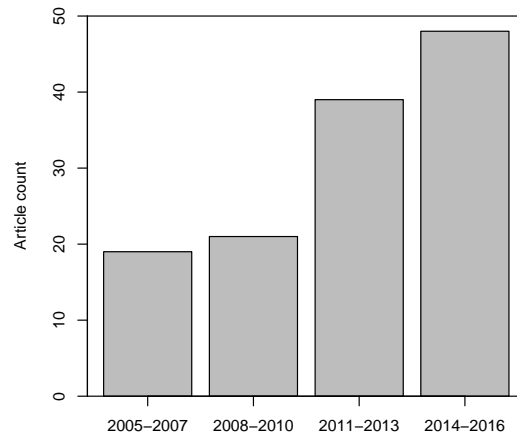
<sup>1</sup>These include the Afrobarometer, AmericasBarometer, Arab Barometer, Asian Barometer, Central and Eastern Eurobarometer, and Latinobarometer.

<sup>2</sup>We consider as *developing* any country other than Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, Malta, Monaco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We have reservations about the developing/developed terminology, but settled on it because it is the most widely-used in political science and, in our estimation, the least offensive way to refer to the set of countries we have in mind.

<sup>3</sup>In this classification, and throughout this article, we include both mass and elite surveys. Following Groves et al. (2009), we define a *survey* as a large-N, systematic method of collecting information about a population from a subset.

<sup>4</sup>A recent exception is the compilation of guidelines in SRC (2016), as are the related edited volumes on multinational, multiregional, and multicultural (3MC) surveys (Harkness et al. 2010; Johnson et al. Forthcoming). Although pitched at cross-national survey projects, it is also a useful reference for some of the general challenges of fielding surveys in developing countries.

<sup>5</sup>Some of these challenges also arise when conducting surveys of hard-to-reach populations in more-developed countries (see, e.g., Tourangeau et al. 2014).



**Figure 1**

Political science publications using original surveys from the developing world. Figures are the absolute number of articles using an original survey from a developing country published between 2005 and 2016 in *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Electoral Studies*, *Journal of Politics*, *Political Behavior*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, or *World Politics*.

with most review articles, a first source is the published research on the topic: in our case, research on survey methodology that deals with questions of particular relevance in developing contexts. The methodological research, however, has yet to catch up with the pace of new challenges arising as scholars increasingly conduct surveys in the developing world. Many pressing challenges have simply not been taken up by methods scholarship. Where there is little or no guidance in published studies of survey methodology, we turn instead to best practices. Although scholars may have yet to publish systematic studies on some of the methodological issues that arise when conducting surveys in the developing world, researchers fielding surveys regularly find ways to resolve them.

To collect this information about survey research in practice, our research assistants combed through the methodological information available about the major barometers as well as every journal article containing an original survey conducted in a developing country that was published between 2005 and 2016 in *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Electoral Studies*, *Journal of Politics*, *Political Behavior*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, or *World Politics*. For the articles, they pulled out relevant information about the method of survey implementation from the published articles themselves, methodological or online appendixes, and any other publicly available resource. As it turned out, these sources reported precious little information about the details of how each survey was implemented; indeed, very few provided any information beyond a brief description of sample design and, occasionally, the response rate. We return below to this issue of reporting and transparency in survey research methods.

Given the dearth of information about how published survey data from the developing world is collected, we decided to field our own survey of experts. Our goal was to ask the top researchers conducting surveys in the developing world how they did so. In this

review article, we rely on all three of these sources to characterize the state of the field and to provide insights about the range of available options when it comes to implementing surveys in the developing world. We examine innovations across many aspects of survey implementation, including sampling, enumeration, data collection, ethical considerations, and reporting. We also assess these practices and offer suggestions for future methodological inquiry and for greater research transparency.

## 2. THE EXPERT SURVEY

We fielded an online survey via Qualtrics of experts who had conducted an original survey in a developing country. We invited scholars who were either principal investigators on one of the regional barometers or had published an article in *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Journal of Politics*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, or *World Politics* between January 2010 and October 2015 that analyzed an original survey in a developing country.<sup>6</sup> Experts were first invited to participate in December 2015, reminders were sent after several weeks, and the survey was closed in March 2016.<sup>7</sup> Of the 175 experts we invited to participate, 80 responded to the survey, a response rate of 46%.<sup>8</sup> Among those who completed the survey in one sitting, it took, on average, 24 minutes. Our average respondent was 40 years old and of those who reported their gender, 67% were men.

We asked each respondent a series of questions about the most recent original survey with some political content that they fielded in a developing country. Among the most recent surveys they had conducted, 41% were fielded in Latin America, 26% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 17% in Asia, 9% in the post-Soviet bloc, and 7% in the Middle East and North Africa. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of these surveys were face-to-face (85%), the rest being mostly over the phone and a handful of online surveys. Among the surveys conducted face-to-face, just over half (51%) recorded responses on an electronic device. Most of the surveys used national samples (58%), and only a small subset were panels (13%). The average sample size was 1,800 observations.<sup>9</sup> On average, the length of the survey was 35 minutes.<sup>10</sup> These surveys were most commonly funded through external government grants (52%), but some were also supported by university grants (30%), or scholars' research accounts (20%).

In most cases, the experts we surveyed hired a local survey firm or academic institute to field their survey (68%). Among the rest, one-third reported that there were no survey firms or academic institutes in their target country capable of fielding their survey. Many of the surveys employed visual or audio aids (43%) and a fairly large number used behavioral tasks (22%). Impressively, the vast majority of our expert respondents reported including some kind of experiment in their survey (68%), a testament to the growing field of survey experiments (Druckman et al. 2006; Mutz 2011).

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<sup>6</sup>We did not include authors of published articles that analyzed barometer data who were not principal investigators on those barometers. We also excluded ourselves.

<sup>7</sup>The complete questionnaire and dataset are available on the authors' websites.

<sup>8</sup>As is typically the case with online surveys (Peytchev 2009), 30 of our 80 respondents (38%) terminated the survey early. All of the averages and proportions we report below for a particular question in the expert survey are based on the total number of responses to that question.

<sup>9</sup>This figure excludes two unusually large samples of over 10,000 respondents.

<sup>10</sup>This excludes two outlier experts who reported their surveys taking 175 and 300 minutes.

### 3. SAMPLING

Most academic surveys, especially mass surveys, in the developing world continue to be conducted face-to-face. In most cases, internet and phone penetration are still not high enough to achieve representative samples. Even where there is relatively high usage of phones, telephone sampling frames are often systematically incomplete. And in much of the developing world, cell phones – which may not be listed in telephone directories or officially registered – are far more prevalent than land lines.<sup>11</sup> Instead, most scholars conduct face-to-face surveys in developing contexts and use some form of multistage area sampling that proceeds from geographic units to households to individuals (see, e.g., Kalton 1983; Lohr 2010). For convenience and cost-savings, scholars also typically use cluster sampling at some stage. In our expert survey, the vast majority of our respondents (77%) said their most recent survey involved some type of area sampling. The next largest category was convenience sampling, at 11%.

Multistage cluster sampling requires some information about how to divide the target population, both geographically and numerically. The respondents to our expert survey who used this sampling method typically used census information or maps to identify geographic units and census data or other government agency data to determine the population size in each unit. Then, once enumerators arrived at the enumeration area, they typically selected a block and every *n*th household, often excluding potential subjects residing in institutions like hospitals or military barracks. This procedure is difficult to employ in rural settings where dwellings are not organized into blocks, so some of our respondents – and many published surveys – instruct enumerators to select households along a random walk. Of course, human beings are notoriously bad at randomizing, and recent research shows that how enumerators are instructed to conduct a random walk systematically affects both selection probabilities and survey results (Bauer 2014, 2016).<sup>12</sup> Although less common in more-developed contexts, mass surveys in the developing world regularly employ quotas (typically gender and age groups) to ensure demographic balance: in our expert survey, 59% of the face-to-face surveys employed them. In the absence of quotas, researchers typically construct poststratification weights, with raking being the most widely-accepted method (Kalton & Flores-Cervantes 2003).

Across surveys, there is a great deal of variation in the number of times a selected household is visited before being replaced. Among the surveys conducted by our expert respondents, just over two-thirds revisited a selected household at least once. One expert reported doing up to five revisits. In principle, revisits – or callbacks in phone surveys – should increase response rates and reduce the potential for nonresponse bias. But revisits can also be costly: they require that enumerators, who may not reside in or near the enumeration area, remain in the area or return to it multiple times. We know of no studies focused on the effects of revisits in developing contexts, but recent research suggests there is little gain from repeated costly attempts to contact potential respondents (Legleye et al. 2013). Another approach is to make contact with potential participants in advance and set up appointments for later interviews with the enumeration team. Roughly one in five of our expert respondents said they did this in their most recent survey. Yet, there is still

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<sup>11</sup>Address-based sampling (Iannacchione 2011), which requires reliable address directories, tends also to be infeasible in these contexts.

<sup>12</sup>Some of our expert respondents also noted in open-ended responses how difficult it is to ensure that enumerators comply with these instructions.

little empirical research demonstrating the benefits of these approaches to nonresponse and representativeness.

A common challenge in applying area sampling techniques in the developing world is that census data may be unreliable, outdated, or unavailable. This may be especially true among populations that are informally settled, where rates of violence and migration are high, or in nondemocratic contexts where government information is not publicly available. A small number of our experts and a small number of published articles in political science use alternatives involving satellite and GPS technology. In the absence of reliable census data on urban migrant settlements in China, Landry & Shen (2005) develop a method for using GPS coordinates to select enumeration areas (see also Landry 2010). Driscoll & Lidow (2014) use high-resolution satellite images and remote sensing technology to gather population information in Somalia in the absence of up-to-date government data (see also Montalvo et al. Forthcoming). These kinds of techniques, which are being developed especially rapidly in research on public health and development, will no doubt become more common in political science as these technologies continue to improve.

In face-to-face surveys, enumerators are typically instructed to keep track of every household they visit so that the researcher can calculate the survey response rate. As defined by most scholars, the response rate is the number of completed interviews divided by the number of eligible individuals selected into the sample (Groves et al. 2009). The gold standard is to employ the *final disposition codes* set out by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR 2016) and use those frequencies to calculate a response rate – typically, the minimum response rate, RR1. One issue in calculating response rates is how to deal with cases of unknown eligibility. For instance, if an individual answers the door and immediately turns the enumerator away, it may be impossible to know whether that individual met the eligibility criteria for the survey. Again, AAPOR offers researchers guidelines and several options – each making different assumptions – for calculating the likely proportion of eligible subjects (Smith 2009b).

Whether or not individuals participate in a survey is a function of a wide range of factors: individual predispositions, contextual factors, the topic of the survey, and the disposition of the enumerator, among others (Banducci & Stevens 2015; Durrant et al. 2010; Groves & Couper 1998). Surveys conducted in the developing world tend to report higher response rates than those conducted in more-developed countries. This may be because face-to-face surveys, which are more common in developing contexts, tend to yield higher rates of response than phone or online surveys.<sup>13</sup> It may also be because public opinion surveys are simply less common in these contexts. The respondents in our expert survey reported an average response rate in their surveys of 74%. Among the published articles with mass surveys that reported a response rate, the average was 69%. For comparison, the 2016 American National Election Study reports a 50% response rate for its face-to-face component and a 44% response rate for the online component.

Moreover, there are broader debates – and quite a lot of hand-wringing – about declining response rates in more-developed contexts and their impact on scholarship (Groves et al. 2006, 2002; Massey & Tourangeau 2013). If nonrespondents were similar to survey

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<sup>13</sup>However, this may at least partly be an artifact of the reliance on enumerator reports. Enumerators, often paid a piece-rate for each interview, have little incentive to waste time tracking every attempted contact. As a result, response rates based on enumerator reports may well underestimate the number of contacts, inflating the response rate.

respondents, then response rates would be mere curiosities. But most scholars suspect that response rates are associated with some nonresponse bias. The empirical evidence on this, however, is mixed (Groves & Peytcheva 2008), and mostly focuses on more-developed countries. We still know little about how response rates vary in the developing world across space and time, what techniques help increase participation, and the extent to which nonresponse induces bias.

#### 4. ENUMERATORS

Given the prevalence of face-to-face surveys in developing contexts, enumerators often play a crucial role in data collection. In countries with well-developed polling operations, enumerators are often professionals who make their living enumerating surveys. Where surveys are less frequent, firms and NGOs regularly recruit university students willing to do part-time work. For the surveys conducted by our expert respondents, most of the enumerators had been recruited by some member of the research team, either one of the principal investigators or a research assistant. In a third of the cases, the contracted survey organization recruited the enumerators.

The role of enumerators in shaping survey outcomes and introducing error in face-to-face surveys has been receiving increasing scholarly attention. Bischooping & Schuman's (1992) classic pen experiment in Nicaragua documented one example of how even the seemingly minor choices of enumerators – pen color – can have significant effects on responses. More recently, scholars have documented a range of interviewer effects (see Schaeffer et al. 2010; West & Blom 2017), stemming primarily from the effects of observable interviewer characteristics. The gender (Benstead 2014b; Flores-Macías & Lawson 2008; Liu & Stainback 2013), ethnicity (Adida et al. 2016), and apparent religiosity of the enumerator (Benstead 2014a; Blaydes & Gillum 2013) all seem to especially influence survey responses. For the most part, the particular interviewer attribute seems to affect different types of responses in intuitive ways: religiosity affecting questions about religiosity among coreligionists, gender affecting questions about gender issues, and so on. Survey researchers should consider these effects when recruiting enumerators; for certain studies and in certain contexts, it may be important to ensure that enumerators and respondents are cogender, coethnic, or coreligionists.

In general, interviewer characteristics seem to especially affect responses to attitudinal, sensitive, complex, and open-ended questions – although they sometimes also affect responses to factual questions (see Davis & Silver 2003). There is also some evidence that interviewers' own opinions affect survey responses (Himelein 2016). An enumerator's gender, level of experience, and personality also appear to affect both responses and the willingness of potential respondents to participate (Blom et al. 2007; Durrant et al. 2010; Olson & Peytchev 2007; West & Blom 2017; West & Olson 2010). And interviewer characteristics – particularly experience – seem also to affect paradata like interviewer observations of the respondent, household, or neighborhood (Levendusky & Jackman 2003; Sinibaldi et al. 2013; West & Kreuter 2013).<sup>14</sup> Interviewers probably affect survey error in every study, but how they affect it will vary by context and survey design. As more and more surveys are conducted in the developing world, we ought to continue to expand our understanding

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<sup>14</sup>Among the surveys conducted by our expert respondents, nearly half solicited this type of interviewer-observed paradata.

of these effects and the circumstances that exacerbate or attenuate them.

It should be noted that interviewer effects are difficult to identify because interviewers are rarely randomly paired with respondents. Instead, most studies use hierarchical models that nest respondents within interviewers and control for respondent characteristics. Still, we know that certain types of interviewers are more likely to be assigned to areas with certain types of respondents; for instance, male interviewers and those with more experience are often sent to more violent neighborhoods.

Another major challenge in enumerator-administered surveys is monitoring. Often paid per completed interview, enumerators have strong financial incentives to save time by fabricating interviews. If they are being sent into high-crime or remote enumeration areas, they may have personal incentives to shirk. They may shorten an interview by skipping some questions and making up the responses, or fabricate an entire interview that never took place. In quota samples, enumerators may lie about a respondent's age or gender to fill their daily quota. Middle-aged women tend to be easier to find and more willing to participate, so enumerators interview them and claim they had interviewed harder-to-reach demographic groups like young men. Nearly one-third of our expert respondents reported having thrown out some interviews in their data because of enumerator dishonesty.

A recent method for detecting fabricated data caused an uproar with the claim that 26% of publicly available surveys in the developing world contain significant amounts of fabricated data (Kuriakose & Robbins 2016; see also Koczela et al. 2015; Robbins Forthcoming; Slomczynski et al. 2017).<sup>15</sup> The method works by identifying near-matching observations in survey datasets, under the assumption that enumerators fabricating interviews are likely to generate responses that are unusually similar. And while the specific claim about the extent of the problem is under debate (see, e.g., Simmons et al. 2016), researchers have also improved their monitoring efforts.

Survey researchers regularly do some kind of respondent follow-up – either in-person or over the phone – to validate some subset of interviews. Roughly half of our expert respondents reported having done this as part of their most recent survey. More recent advances in enumerator monitoring have been made possible by the use of electronic devices like smartphones or tablets rather than the traditional paper-and-pencil to conduct interviews.<sup>16</sup> Unlike paper, electronic devices allow researchers to record audio of enumerators reading questions aloud, identify the location of interviews using GPS, and track the duration of interviews and individual items (e.g., Gomila et al. Forthcoming).<sup>17</sup> Cross-national barometer projects like the AmericasBarometer have already developed extensive quality-control protocols that include audio recording, enumerator photo captures, GPS tracking, and other electronic tools (Montalvo et al. Forthcoming).

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<sup>15</sup>See, for instance, Gelman, Andrew, “Can you trust international surveys?” Monkey Cage blog at *The Washington Post*, February 27, 2016. See also the response: Robbins, Michael, “Yes, you can trust international surveys. Mostly,” Monkey Cage blog at *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2016.

<sup>16</sup>Just over half of our expert respondents conducted their most recent survey on electronic devices.

<sup>17</sup>On the other hand, the electronic devices themselves may affect survey responses (Bush & Prather 2017).



## 5. RESPONDENTS

Once enumerators select respondents and follow protocol for interviewing them, it can also be challenging to elicit high-quality responses. Enumerators are typically trained to find a quiet and private place in which to conduct an interview, but this can be difficult or impossible in some developing contexts. Without privacy from bystanders, respondents may self-censor their responses, although the limited empirical evidence on this score is mixed (Diop et al. 2015; Smith 1997). Where communal living is common, private spaces may not exist. Even if they do, communities may have norms against sitting with a stranger in private. Taboos are especially common against taking an enumerator of the opposite sex into a private setting, but sometimes also apply to non-coethnics. In some contexts, it is impossible to conduct an interview without the (often male) head of household being present. Moreover, where crime rates are high, respondents may be reluctant to even allow an enumerator into their home, preferring to conduct the interview outside, in the doorway, or through a window. According to the most recent round of the Afrobarometer, for example, bystanders were present during no less than 44% of interviews. In our expert survey, the most common bystanders were husbands.

One way researchers mitigate some of these situations is by ensuring that interviews are conducted by cogender or coethnic enumerators (e.g., Corstange 2009). Bleck & Michelitch (2017) had mixed-gender enumerator teams simultaneously interview one man and one woman in each household in rural Mali to facilitate privacy for female respondents. Another option is to make some portion of the interview self-administered and ensure the respondent's privacy during that section (see, e.g., Chauchard 2013). Where bystanders are unavoidable, researchers can also ask enumerators to record that a bystander was present – and who it was – and account for that in the analysis.

Respondents themselves may have difficulty responding to enumerator questions. In the developing world, lower levels of literacy and numeracy, multiple languages, and the existence of local dialects and oral languages can complicate enumeration. Low literacy and numeracy can restrict the types of questions and visual aids researchers can utilize. And respondents with little formal education may find it difficult, for instance, to think in terms of proportions, and may be unaccustomed to the exam-like style of closed-ended survey questions, increasing systematic item nonresponse or satisficing (see Krosnick 1991). They may also find it difficult to self-administer a portion of the survey.

Low literacy may also make it difficult for researchers to embed into their survey experiments with lengthy texts, and researchers may instead need to consider visual aids, cartoons, or videos. Even when only some portion of the target population is less literate, its likely correlation with other characteristics and political attitudes means that researchers ought to consider designing their questionnaire to accommodate these respondents.

Where formal schooling and surveys are less widespread, respondents may be unaccustomed to answering questions, especially on political topics. They may find the interview format very awkward and the notion of closed-ended responses foreign. They may also find it difficult to transition between different question formats. In our expert survey, 35% of researchers reported that some respondents had difficulty discussing politics, naming women as the group with most difficulty. It can be useful to have enumerators identify whether individual respondents seemed to have more or less difficulty with the survey. In the most recent Afrobarometer round, enumerators reported that 52% of respondents had difficulty answering questions. In some of the poorest countries, however, the vast majority of respondents did: 95% in Guinea, 93% in Mali, 91% in Niger, 86% in Senegal, and 81%

in Benin and Gabon. Simplifying questionnaires can surely help with these issues, but researchers should also recruit enumerators who can patiently assist respondents. As Paluck (2009, 45) relates, “it is an important methodological and even ethical consideration to compose a research team that will invite the confidence and frankness of the whole range of participants in the sample.”

More generally, survey researchers in developing contexts often have to field their studies in multiple languages.<sup>18</sup> Among our expert respondents, 67% reported translating their questionnaire, half to only one language and the rest ranging from two to 10 languages.<sup>19</sup> High-quality translations are especially important in instances when a single study is conducted in multiple languages, as in the case of most cross-national projects. Even when rigorous translation procedures are implemented, it can be very difficult to generate equivalent items across languages (e.g., Davidov & De Beuckelaer 2010; Heath et al. 2009).<sup>20</sup> Since language is often correlated with characteristics like ethnicity, religion, or class, non-equivalence can bias inferences: what appear to be ethnic or class differences in responses on an item may instead be an artifact of non-equivalence across translations.

Scholars have proposed a number of alternative translation techniques, including back-translation (Brislin 1970), team translation (Harkness 1999), or some combination (McGorry 2000).<sup>21</sup> However, we are not aware of any studies that empirically assess the relative success of these different methods in generating more equivalent instruments or responses.

In some instances, researchers may allow enumerators to translate a questionnaire on the spot. Only about 10% of our expert respondents had done this. Advance translations probably reduce measurement error, but they may not always be feasible. In some developing contexts, local languages and dialects may be oral. In some parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, mother tongues are rarely used in writing, for instance, and some local dialects of indigenous or creole languages in Latin America are also oral. It may be impossible to translate a survey instrument into these local languages, or expect even local enumerators to be able to read it. In these cases, researchers may have no choice but to rely on local enumerators to translate the survey on the spot and will instead need to spend extra time training enumerators in the intended meaning of each question.

Obviously, the kinds of questions researchers can ask vary dramatically across contexts. Political questions can be very sensitive in nondemocratic regimes (Tsai 2010), and they can yield unreliable responses. As Chia (2014, 384) sums up, “people’s willingness to voice opinions may be a function of their perceptions of the government’s stance, and individuals are likely to refrain from expressing opinions that appear to contradict the authority.” Even respondents in democratic countries may be reluctant to voice their support for certain groups or individuals. Greater political uncertainty and higher rates of crime and violence can make respondents in developing countries more reluctant to be truthful.<sup>22</sup> For instance, asking respondents how they voted in an election seems trivial in more-developed

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<sup>18</sup>Alternatively, among multilingual populations, there may be benefits to offering respondents multiple interview-language options (see Lee & Perez 2014).

<sup>19</sup>Most experts translated their instruments themselves, with feedback from local experts.

<sup>20</sup>For an example focused on party identification, see Johnston (2006).

<sup>21</sup>For overviews of issues in survey translation, see Harkness (2007) and Smith (2010).

<sup>22</sup>These settings also make survey participation riskier, forcing researchers to think seriously about ensuring respondent confidentiality. Another benefit of conducting face-to-face surveys on electronic devices is the ability to encrypt and lock responses upon completing an interview, ensuring their immediate inaccessibility.

democracies, but may be far more sensitive where elections are still new and accompanied by violence. More than half of our expert respondents reported asking sensitive questions on their surveys.

This becomes especially problematic if respondents think that the survey is being sponsored by a political actor. Researchers typically provide enumerators with study introduction scripts that emphasize the academic purpose of their studies. Even so, respondents may falsely believe that surveys asking numerous questions about politics are sponsored by political actors. In the most recent round of the Afrobarometer, which asks respondents at the end of the survey who they think sponsored it, 38% of respondents thought it was their government, a political party, or a politician. The 2016 AmericasBarometer in Ecuador asked a similar question at the end of its survey and found that nearly half of respondents thought the survey was sponsored by the government or other political actor.

Scholars have developed a range of tools to address the problem of eliciting truthful responses on sensitive issues (e.g., Tourangeau & Yan 2007). One common finding is that responses to sensitive questions tend to be more reliable when the survey is self-administered rather than enumerator-administered (e.g. Tourangeau & Smith 1996). Since many surveys in developing countries are administered by enumerators, one way to do this is to make the sensitive portion of the survey self-administered (e.g., Beber et al. 2014), assuming respondents are willing and able to do this. With convincing assurances of the anonymity of their responses, respondents may be more truthful.<sup>23</sup>

Among political scientists, experimental approaches to sensitive questions have become more common. These include list experiments (e.g., Corstange 2009; Glynn 2013; Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. 2012; Oliveros 2016), endorsement experiments (e.g., Aronow et al. 2015; Blair & Imai 2012; Lyall et al. 2015), and randomized response techniques (e.g., Gingerich 2010; Gingerich et al. 2016; Jann et al. 2012). All of these approaches attempt to assure respondents that they can be truthful because neither the enumerator nor the researcher will know how they responded.<sup>24</sup> But they require some sophistication on the part of the respondent and usually also necessitate literacy. Other scholars have used implicit association tests to reveal biases respondents may wish to occlude or may not even recognize (e.g., Clayton 2015; Lowes et al. 2015). But these tests must be done on a computer, which can be distracting and unfamiliar to respondents in poorer contexts.

It can be challenging to generate high-quality survey response data in developing contexts. Researchers have proposed and implemented an impressive variety of resourceful solutions to these challenges. But we still need many more empirical assessments of these innovations: how effective are they, and which solutions are more effective than others? Future methodological research ought to address these questions.

## 6. HUMAN SUBJECTS AND ETHICS

Survey research involves human subjects, and most universities – particularly in the US and Europe – require researchers conducting survey research to secure advance approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Among our expert survey respondents, 78% reported

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<sup>23</sup>It seems also useful to ask enumerators to report their impressions of the respondent's truthfulness, though these impressions may also be subject to bias.

<sup>24</sup>However, the researcher can use new methods to assign probabilities to the response options for each individual (Imai et al. 2015).

receiving IRB approval, exemption, or other authorization at their home institution.<sup>25</sup> They reported that the approval process took between 1 and 20 weeks, with the mode being one month. But many reported difficulties with the process: one-third of the experts rated their IRB process as “difficult” or “very difficult.”

While a great deal has been written about IRB standards and the ethics of research with human subjects (e.g., Seligson 2008),<sup>26</sup> researchers often face particular difficulties when seeking to conduct survey research in developing countries. These difficulties often result from IRB reviewers being unfamiliar with the research site, requirements for in-country research permits, and the pace of change in some developing contexts.

One key challenge is that many university IRB standards are written for clinical research, and IRB personnel are typically unfamiliar with most international contexts. As a result, IRB reviews often ask researchers planning surveys in developing countries for additional information, slowing the review process (see Zechmeister 2016). One of our expert respondents, for instance, noted that their review process had been stalled on the issue of consent. While the IRB reviewers preferred that survey respondents give written consent, the researcher felt that written consent forms would put subjects at greater risk since they would reveal the identity of respondents and could fall into the hands of political actors. In some contexts, moreover, low levels of literacy may make respondents uncomfortable about signing written consent forms. Inflexible IRB reviewers with little knowledge of the context in which proposed survey research is sited can slow down the approval process. Universities should consider incorporating in-person or phone interviews with researchers applying for IRB approval of international research.

A common stumbling block with review boards centers on incentives. In some cultures, it is simply unacceptable to arrive at a stranger’s door without offering a gift. Researchers may also feel obligated to compensate subjects for their time, or use incentives to increase participation rates. On the other hand, there are valid ethical concerns about incentives that are high enough to be coercive. Offering a poor laborer a day’s wage for a half-hour interview may induce them to respond to sensitive questions (i.e., accept more risk) they might otherwise have preferred to avoid. One recent study in the US found no effect of higher monetary payments on risk-taking (Singer & Couper 2008); but we still know little about how incentives operate in the developing world.<sup>27</sup> In the meantime, researchers should use their contextual knowledge – and the advice of local experts – to evaluate the coercive potential of incentives, especially when researching low-income populations or contexts where resources are scarce.

Increasingly, university IRBs are requiring researchers to obtain in-country research permits or seek approval for their study from in-country IRBs. Research review boards are rare in developing countries, and those that do exist tend to focus on medical research exclusively. But many developing countries do require foreign researchers to obtain a government-issued permit to conduct research.<sup>28</sup> Among the experts in our survey, only a handful said they

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<sup>25</sup>Of those working with collaborators, 70% reported knowing that their collaborators had also received IRB approval.

<sup>26</sup>For an overview of ethical codes in survey research, see Smith (2009a).

<sup>27</sup>There are also other important considerations in evaluating the use of incentives (e.g., Singer et al. 1998). Moreover, researchers ought to consider local practices among other survey researchers. If relatively well-heeled international researchers set expectations of remuneration, surveys may become more costly for local researchers.

<sup>28</sup>The process can become complicated when permit-granting agencies ask for the researcher to

obtained an in-country research permit. Most said such a permit was not required in the country they studied, but several said they did not obtain one even when it was.

Securing an in-country research permit can prove challenging. The process can be lengthy since government agencies issue these types of permits infrequently. Especially in less democratic contexts, governments may also seek to block or delay research, particularly on political topics. Bureaucrats in permitting agencies may also expect or demand bribes in order to issue a research permit or speed up the process, putting a foreign researcher in a difficult ethical and legal position. Thus, while there are good reasons to ask researchers to provide some kind of local assessment of their proposed studies with human subjects (see Zechmeister 2016),<sup>29</sup> efforts to *require* official in-country permits or local IRB approval may impede research in some developing contexts.

Conducting human-subjects research in developing countries is often costly and time-consuming, and can require adaptation. Repeated pilot studies may be necessary to validate translations, particularly when working in languages that are predominantly oral. Researchers may also need to pretest their questionnaires repeatedly when working with populations less accustomed to responding to surveys or taking tests. All of this means making changes to questionnaires and other protocols while the researcher is in the field. Moreover, the political climate on the ground can change quickly, requiring researchers to adjust their research plans.<sup>30</sup> All of these factors make it difficult for researchers to interact with review boards that rightly prefer to take extra caution when evaluating international research. One way to mitigate bureaucratic holdup is for researchers to seek IRB approval for the broad contours of a study, before, say, the instrument is finalized, and to submit revisions to an approved protocol from the field. If relatively minor revisions can be reviewed quickly, this approach can both allow reviewers time to thoughtfully evaluate the proposed study and provide room for the researcher to make last-minute changes that are approved quickly.

Although university IRBs typically focus their attention only on protecting respondents, survey researchers also have broader ethical responsibilities to consider (see Fujii 2012). One that researchers fielding surveys in the developing world regularly confront is protecting enumerators and local collaborators. A research study must not only consider the risk to which respondents are exposed – which is typically minimal in survey research – but the far greater risk to which some enumerators are exposed. Those enumerators being sent to high-crime areas, neighborhoods controlled by gangs, or conflict zones put themselves at risk for the research study.<sup>31</sup> Enumerators working in very poor environments, with little access to food during the workday, or on difficult subjects like memories of violence, also take on physical and psychological risks (Paluck 2009). It is the researcher’s ethical obligation to work to minimize these risks, by substituting high-risk enumeration areas, sending enumerators to

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obtain university IRB approval first and the university IRB requires the in-country permit to grant approval. Of course, nondemocratic regimes often impose particularly stringent regulations on survey research (see, e.g., Manion 2010).

<sup>29</sup>An alternative required by some boards is a written assessment from an in-country researcher.

<sup>30</sup>Our own research projects have been disrupted by political events: in Michelitch’s case, by a coup in Mali (Bleck & Michelitch 2017), and in Lupu’s case, the Russian annexation of Crimea (Lupu & Peisakhin Forthcoming).

<sup>31</sup>In a tragic example, in 2015, two enumerators working for the federal statistics agency in Mexico were killed while conducting interviews in a community adjacent to rural areas in the midst of drug-related violence (see “Hallan muertos a dos encuestadores del Inegi en la Sierra Tarahumara,” *El Financiero*, March 11, 2015).

high-risk areas in teams rather than individually, equipping enumerators with cellphones and battery packs, setting aside time and resources for physical and psychological rest, and working with local communities and organizations to ensure safe passage for enumerators coming into high-risk enumeration areas as outsiders.

## 7. SURVEY RESEARCH TRANSPARENCY: A PROPOSAL

When conducting a survey in the developing world, researchers make many mundane decisions – about what sampling frame to use, how to select and train enumerators, whether to use paper-and-pencil questionnaires or electronic devices, etc. – that affect the quality of the data. Moreover, many scholars innovate techniques to address the challenges of their particular study that could be replicated by future scholars. But we lack a common standard for which aspects of survey research design should be reported.<sup>32</sup> This both makes survey research lack some transparency and fails to highlight the impressive range of techniques being employed by researchers to collect high-quality survey data.

Among the substantive articles we identified that relied on some survey conducted in the developing world, most described – either in the article or in an auxiliary appendix – the sampling strategy. Nevertheless, we were unable to find information about the sample design for 4% of the surveys analyzed in these articles. Where we did find information, it was typically vague. Authors often noted that their survey consisted of a “national probability sample of country X” and left it at that. Others characterized their survey as using a “multistage stratified sample” with little or no detail about the strata used and the selection criteria within strata. Particularly in the case of national samples, researchers often have to substitute (usually a small number of) selected sampling units that are too remote, too dangerous, or inaccessible. But only 16% of these studies reported substituting enumeration areas, and of those one in five explained how the substitutions were selected. Mass surveys also typically exclude institutionalized individuals – residing in student dorms, hospitals, or military barracks, for instance – but almost none mentioned these exclusions. Authors regularly reported the response rate, although even that was only available for 53% of cases, and typically no information was offered about how nonresponse information was collected or how response rates were calculated.<sup>33</sup>

For nearly one in five surveys, we were unable to ascertain who conducted the fieldwork, whether a survey firm, NGO, or the researchers themselves. Only one in four surveys reported whether a pretest or pilot had been conducted. And nearly half did not report whether the survey was translated. Of those that did report that the survey was translated, only half reported how the survey was translated. We were only able to find the full questionnaire for 20% of the surveys used in these articles. When it came to analyzing the survey data, only one in five surveys employed poststratification weights, and among those only a handful reported the source of the population data, the specific variables employed,

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<sup>32</sup>We describe here the information that is currently available online. Although we are certain that researchers would be willing to share additional information upon request, we think the field would benefit from making a set of standard information publicly available online.

<sup>33</sup>The regional barometers and cross-national survey projects typical report more methodological information. Still, some of the barometers provide no information about their sample designs and only the Afrobarometer currently provides information about enumeration area substitutions, but only for some rounds. None of the barometers currently provide information about how non-response information was collected.

and the weighting method.

Our expert survey revealed a higher level of transparency, although most of it was aspirational. Among our respondents, one third reported that the sampling protocol for their most recent survey is available online, while another 65% said they intended to post it. The figures for response rates were nearly identical. Only 22% reported that their most survey's complete dataset is available online, but another 71% said they planned to make it available. 21% reported that the English-language version of their questionnaire is available online, and another 57% said they intend to make it available online. Remarkably, though, 16% of our respondents reported no intention of making their questionnaire available online in the language in which it was administered.

In short, survey researchers conducting original surveys in the developing world, and even those who have published academic articles using these survey data, currently report very little about how their data were collected. Most commonly, researchers report some minimal information about how the sample was drawn and, roughly half the time, a response rate. To our knowledge, none of the major journals in political science, including the top journals in the field of public opinion, enforce any specific reporting requirements when it comes to original survey research. Recent efforts to promote research transparency in the discipline have focused primarily on replicating research findings based on existing datasets and very little on how original data are generated.

In the spirit of promoting greater transparency, we propose that political scientists and disciplinary journals adopt a minimal standard for reporting the methodology used to collect original survey data.<sup>34</sup> We believe that such a standard would help put a spotlight on the many important innovations being deployed by scholars around the world. This may help to defend international survey research against prevailing skepticism. Moreover, reporting standards would help provide readers, reviewers, and data users with a common base of information with which to assess academic survey data.

We think published research using original survey data from the developing world – as well as the regional barometers and cross-national survey projects – ought to provide readers with the following information, where applicable:

- Sample design protocol down to the selection of individual respondents. This information should include the specific strata used, sources for the sampling frame or population data, and the protocol employed for substituting enumeration areas, households, or individuals. It should also list eligibility criteria (e.g., citizens, adults, civilians) and exclusions (e.g., institutionalized individuals in hospitals, dorms, or military bases).
- Complete questionnaire, including introduction, in the language(s) in which the survey was administered as well as the language in which published research is written.
- Translation protocol, including the language(s) of the survey, who translated the instrument, and how the translation was verified.

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<sup>34</sup>Many researchers (including many of our expert respondents) hire local survey firms or NGOs to field their surveys and may not be involved in some aspects of data collection, such as sample design, enumerator selection, or enumerator monitoring. Still, these scholars would be able to request the relevant information from the implementing organization. Note that our proposed reporting standard could also be adopted for original survey data from the developed world, although some (e.g., sample design, enumerator selection) would not apply to the opt-in online surveys that now predominate in those settings.

- Dates of survey fieldwork as well as dates and locations of pretests or pilots.
- Who supervised fieldwork – whether the researchers or a local survey firm or NGO.
- For face-to-face or phone surveys, how enumerators were selected.
- Platform and software used for enumeration.
- Procedures for validating or monitoring enumeration.
- Response rates and the method by which non-response information was collected.
- Whether poststratification weights are used in the analysis and, if so, the weighting method, variables used, and sources of the population data.

Collecting survey data in developing countries is challenging, and researchers often have to innovate to gather high-quality data in these settings. These innovations, and the methodological choices that inform how data are collected more generally, represent important information for readers, reviewers, and data users. This information would allow the scholarly community to assess the appropriateness of the methods that were employed. But it would also highlight the many ways that political scientists fielding surveys in the developing world are innovating and the very high-quality data that we believe most of their surveys are generating.

## 8. LOOKING FORWARD

More and more political scientists are fielding surveys in the developing world. This growth has meant scholars are both confronting new challenges and developing solutions to them. Advances in satellite and remote sensing technology have helped researchers develop representative samples in the absence of reliable census data. Portable survey software and GPS have allowed them to monitor enumerators in real time and protect respondent information. And innovative solutions have helped improve the quality of survey data collected in environments where private interviews may be difficult to achieve, languages are diverse or oral, and political questions may be sensitive. Indeed, the constant creativity and resourcefulness of researchers conducting survey research in less-developed contexts is impressive.

Of course, there is still much room for improvement. Many survey samples continue to rely on census data that are outdated and inaccurate. High-resolution satellite images are available commercially, but far exceed most survey research budgets. And while remote sensing technology is developing rapidly, most survey researchers do not have the programming skills necessary to apply it to their needs. Moreover, there are still very few studies that actually validate these alternative sampling techniques. Making the technology to use satellite imagery to draw representative samples more widely accessible – and validating these methods – should be an academic priority.

Enumeration technology is also developing rapidly, and while it promises to improve the quality of enumerator-administered survey data, it can also be costly for individual researchers to develop and implement. Empirical evidence of the relative benefits associated with different oversight methods from audio recording to GPS tracking would help researchers make cost-effective choices that fit within modest research budgets.

Scholars have also been innovating with a wide range of strategies to address the challenges of administering surveys where, for a variety of reasons, respondents have difficulty responding to survey questions. These efforts highlight how crucial it is for researchers to think carefully about the population they are studying and ensure that their survey is as inclusive as possible. But while many of these innovations seem likely to help mitigate the problem, we have little empirical evidence of their effectiveness and the magnitudes of their



effects. Future methodological studies should compare various strategies and measure their effects.

We are particularly troubled by the finding that many academic survey respondents believe that the survey they are taking is sponsored by their government or another political actor. This is surely a finding that political scientists must take seriously. One of our expert respondents reported showing each survey participant an introductory video of the research team that emphasized the respondent's anonymity and the academic purpose of the study. Of course, this kind of effort may also emphasize the foreign sponsorship of a survey, which may itself bias responses (e.g., Cilliers et al. 2015). In developing regions where attitudes toward the United States or a former colonial power are especially salient, emphasizing that a survey is sponsored by a university based there may introduce other biases. But there is still little empirical evidence or guidance about the relative effects of these biases; this is one area where future research would be enormously useful.

We have also noted the absence of a common standard among political scientists working in the developing world for reporting the methods they employed in collecting their data. In an era of skepticism about international survey research, it is especially important that scholars make clear how their survey data were generated and highlight innovations. While we recognize that transparency requires additional efforts to describe a survey's design and implementation, we think the improved credibility that will come with transparency more than offsets the cost. Moreover, junior researchers interested in fielding their own surveys in developing contexts would benefit enormously from the ability to replicate – and improve upon – the best practices of senior colleagues. In order to continue to innovate and improve credibility, we ought to arrive at a standard for reporting the methodology used to gather survey data in the developing world.

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