


RESEARCH NOTE

Survey mode and satisfaction with democracy

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Abstract

A growing body of evidence indicates the public is less committed to democracy than conventional wisdom long held. One possibility is that many in the public have internalized the norm that democracy is “good” but that such support is not firmly held. An implication of this reasoning is that because there is an expectation to express support for democracy, responses will be influenced by the presence of an interviewer due to social desirability effects. In this note, we examine the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies—in each year, a portion of respondents were interviewed via the internet while others were interviewed face-to-face. We identify a politically relevant difference between the two survey modes: those interviewed face-to-face express greater satisfaction with democracy. Indeed, the difference we identify is similar in magnitude to the difference typically observed between electoral winners and electoral losers. Our result is robust to different measurement and estimation strategies. While levels of satisfaction are influenced by the presence of an interviewer, a followup analysis indicates that the relationship between satisfaction and winner–loser status is similar across modes.

Keywords: American politics, causal inference, public opinion

As evidence has accumulated regarding democratic backsliding, scholars of both comparative and American politics have turned their attention to scrutinizing the public’s commitment to democracy and democratic norms. While it has been argued that the public’s support for democracy is declining (Mounk, 2018), support for democracy from public surveys remains high, including in the US (Voeten, 2018). However, a growing body of evidence indicates these positive attitudes may be held less firmly than it seems. Along these lines, in this note we examine if a social norm to support democracy has led to an overestimate of positive attitudes toward democracy.

Although expressed support for democracy remains high, a substantial portion of the public expresses openness to “at least one nondemocratic approach—expert rule, autocracy, or military rule—as a good way to govern...” including “many in economically advanced nations”—this includes 53 percent in the United States (Wike and Fetterolf, 2018, 140). That is, there exists a portion of the public who could be termed “democrats in name only” in that they express support for democracy but also endorse processes incompatible with liberal democracy (Wuttke *et al.*, 2022, 426).

These observational findings are consistent with experimental evidence demonstrating the limits of the public’s commitments to democratic norms. For example, partisans fail to punish their leaders for espousing undemocratic positions (Graham and Svobik, 2020). Failure to punish co-partisans in power is particularly notable as voters’ knowledge of democratic norms was pre-tested. In short, partisans support their preferred parties despite the knowledge that their policies would undermine democracy (Simonovits *et al.*, 2022) and may even be willing to compromise on the constitutional process underpinning a democracy if their supported leaders believe it is

appropriate for political expediency (Kingzette *et al.*, 2021). It has become increasingly clear that partisanship can trump support for democracy—a key component of which is accepting electoral outcomes, particularly when preferred parties or candidates face defeat. Elite rhetoric may play an important role in this regard: exposure to elite allegations of electoral irregularities may lead to public disillusionment with the process of transition of power in a democracy (Clayton *et al.*, 2021).

Taken together, both survey and experimental findings suggest that public support for democracy is less firmly held than the existing literature supposed. An assumption that underlies much of this literature is that there exists a norm around expressing support for democracy (Svolik, 2019). If such a norm exists, this implies that responses to questions about democracy will be influenced by the presence of an interviewer as there is an expectation to express support for democracy.

It has long been recognized that characteristics of the survey process can influence responses (Deming, 1944). Among these characteristics, the presence or absence of an interviewer has been identified as a source of variation in survey responses (Wiseman, 1972). As such, the potential for survey mode effects was recognized since the advent of surveys administered over the internet (Joinson, 1999), confirmed by more recent evidence (e.g., Chang and Krosnick, 2009).

If a particular response to a question is perceived as socially undesirable, a respondent may avoid being entirely honest when answering (Locander *et al.*, 1976) as individuals engage, consciously or not, in a process of image management whereby they answer questions so as to present themselves in the most positive light (Millham and Kellogg, 1980; Paulhus, 1984). If respondents are less susceptible to the pressures that drive social desirability when surveys are self-administered, those interviewed via the internet will be more honest as the perceived cost of social sanctions is diminished. Social desirability effects are pervasive (Tourangeau *et al.*, 2000, ch. 9) and their relevance is well established for both political attitudes (e.g., Krysan, 1998) and behavior (e.g., Karp and Brockington, 2005). Different patterns of responses between internet and face-to-face surveys are similarly well documented—for example, levels of partisan acrimony are higher among respondents interviewed via the internet (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018).

We combine insights from the literatures on social desirability and support for democracy. We argue if it is the case that (1) there is a norm to support democracy and (2) that respondents feel freer to be honest in internet surveys then differences should emerge in reported satisfaction across survey mode. Specifically, we hypothesize that those interviewed in-person will express greater satisfaction with democracy. We test this hypothesis with surveys that are nearly identical with the exception of the mode of administration. We find support for our hypothesis and identify a politically relevant difference in self-reported satisfaction. We conclude that absent the possibility of an immediate social sanction, respondents report less satisfaction with democracy indicating a lower level of support than was often appreciated. Our result is robust to different measures and estimation strategies. Reassuringly we demonstrate that substantive relationships—we examine winner–loser status and satisfaction—are not necessarily altered by survey mode.

Our focus on satisfaction with democracy warrants some discussion as the ubiquitous satisfaction item does not directly tap the sort of illiberal attitudes associated with deconsolidation. While there exists disagreement among scholars as to what precisely the item measures, there is some degree of consensus: it is thought to be an intermediate-level variable for measuring political support, that lies between diffuse support variables such as regime-type preferences and specific support variables such as executive approval of an incumbent political leader (Foa *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, the lack of specificity in the question wording of the measure is an issue (Canache *et al.*, 2001). Literal interpretations of this measure run into problems arising from subjective evaluations of what democracy is, and its consistent evolution of what it has come to be at the time of research (Ferrin, 2016). However, as indicated by Foa *et al.* (2020), satisfaction with democracy reliably measures individual assessment of the democratic performance in the

country. In this sense, satisfaction with democracy can be interpreted as an individual's assessment of the country's political system in their experience more than a generalized experience of democracy (Linde and Ekman, 2003) if not quite “an expression of approval of the democratic process” (Singh *et al.*, 2012, 205). As a practical matter, the item is related to a host of relevant indicators, including satisfaction with democratic institutions (Lundmark *et al.*, 2020) and the performance of democracy, including the rule of law and corruption (Wagner *et al.*, 2009). Thus, even if dissatisfaction is not synonymous with illiberalism, the item can be utilized to test our hypothesis of a norm to express support for democracy.

1. Data

We utilize the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES) conducted by the Center for Political Studies (CPS). In each year, the CPS obtained two separate nationally representative samples—one of which was conducted with face-to-face interviewers (FTF) and another over the internet. In 2012, 3567 respondents (65 percent of the total) who completed both the pre- and post-wave surveys were interviewed by internet compared to 1880 who were interviewed FTF. In 2016, 2566 respondents (71 percent) were interviewed over the internet compared to 1040 FTF respondents. While different sampling techniques were used to obtain the samples (e.g., cluster sampling was used for the FTF interviews), this does not necessarily pose an issue for our purposes. We acknowledge that a research design in which mode was randomly assigned after respondents agreed to be interviewed is necessary to obtain a clean causal estimate of mode on satisfaction (Gooch and Vavreck, 2019). While we cannot treat survey mode as truly random, we may be able to treat mode “as if” randomly administered (Dunning, 2008) allowing us to estimate the impact of mode—and thus, social desirability—on self-reported satisfaction.

We scrutinize the appropriateness of the assumption of “as if” random assignment by examining if demographic differences exist across modes, perhaps resulting from different patterns of response rates. This is essential as it has been argued that studies of mode effects may be conflated with other aspects of the survey process such as “sampling method, response rates, or sampling frame” (Gooch and Vavreck 2019, 144). Indeed, in both years, there are slight sampling frame differences as the FTF sample only includes respondents from the 48 contiguous states and Washington D.C. However, only 0.23 percent of respondents are from Hawaii and Alaska and as such the decision to include them does not alter the results we present. A larger issue is that the 2012 FTF sample included an over-sample of Black and Latino Americans.¹ We address this issue by utilizing survey weights and, as we discuss in more detail momentarily, by adjusting for a set of demographic covariates, including race, potentially related to survey mode. While we utilize the survey weights provided by the CPS in each of our analyses, this decision does not drive our results.

To examine if there are any demographic imbalances across the two samples, we estimate a model where the dependent variable is survey mode. We include age, income, sex, marital status, education, race, and Census Bureau region; coding instructions for each variable are included in the supplementary material (Appendix A). None of the demographic variables are associated with survey mode at the 5 percent significance level in either year.² Full results of the balance tests are presented in the supplementary material (Appendix B). While we observe balance between the samples, we estimate the relationship between mode and satisfaction while adjusting demographic covariates as we cannot treat mode as truly random; moreover, doing so increases the precision of

¹Another difference in 2012 is that the internet sample was recruited from GfK's KnowledgePanel thus including respondents more familiar with taking surveys. Reassuringly, “panel conditioning” appears to be unrelated to social desirability (Struminskaya, 2016). This different recruitment strategy does make our assumption of as if random assignment more tenuous. Fortunately, the 2016 recruitment is similar across modes.

²This result holds when we examine the bivariate relationship between each of these covariates and survey mode.

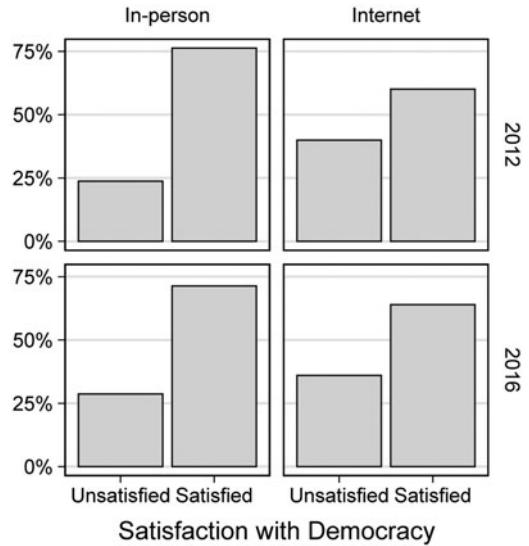


Figure 1. Satisfaction with democracy conditioned on survey mode. Satisfaction is measured dichotomously—the present satisfied represents those who are at least “somewhat satisfied” with democracy.

the estimated relationship. We avoid including any variables that themselves may be influenced by mode.

As noted, we utilize the standard satisfaction item in which respondents are asked, “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States?” While it is argued the measure “gauges people’s responses to the process of democratic governance” (Anderson, 1998, 584) and can “be thought of as more concrete than measures that tap citizens’ views of democratic principles but as more diffuse than evaluations about the government in place” (Nadeau *et al.*, 2021, 6), we investigate the robustness of our results using two related attitudes—outlined later—given conceptual ambiguity discussed earlier. We initially examine the effect of mode by dichotomizing the satisfaction item so that all those who reported being at least somewhat satisfied as one and all others as zero. We test the robustness of our results by utilizing the original four-category coding (coded so that larger values represent greater satisfaction).

2. Results

We begin by presenting the distribution of satisfaction conditioned on survey mode in Figure 1, where the satisfaction measure is coded dichotomously.³ The columns represent survey mode, while each row presents the data for a particular year. The gap between the percent who are satisfied and unsatisfied is noticeably smaller in the internet sample in both years. For example, in 2016 the gap is 35 percentage points in the FTF sample compared to 28 percentage points in the internet sample.

We estimate a linear regression model with a dummy variable representing survey mode to estimate the effect of mode on self-reported satisfaction. We code those interviewed by internet as one and those interviewed FTF as zero. A negative coefficient therefore indicates a lower likelihood of being satisfied among internet respondents. We present results for each year separately as well as for a pooled model. The result of interest, the coefficient for mode, is presented in Table 1. Full results are presented in the supplementary material (Appendix B). In 2012, being interviewed in person increases the probability of being at least somewhat satisfied by 16.5

³We display the distribution of the four-point scale conditional on mode in the supplementary material (Appendix F).

Table 1. The relationship between survey mode and satisfaction with democracy

	2012	2016	Pooled
Internet	-0.165 (0.018)	-0.075 (0.021)	-0.130 (0.014)
Constant	0.453 (0.060)	0.435 (0.069)	0.439 (0.046)
Covariates	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed-effect			✓
<i>n</i>	5183	3413	8596
Full results presented in supplementary material			

percentage points ($p < 0.001$) and in 2016 by 7.5 percentage points ($p < 0.001$). This shift is similar in magnitude to known sources of satisfaction, including winner–loser status (e.g., Bernauer and Vatter, 2012; Halliez and Thornton, 2022,5). Models estimated with logistic regression—presented in the supplementary material (Appendix C)—return identical results.

The different sampling frames used for the two samples in each year do not influence our results. Models excluding respondents from Alaska and Hawaii return identical coefficients to those in Table 1. Full results are presented in the supplementary material (Appendix D).

Given the oversampling in the 2012 FTF sample discussed earlier, we assess if the decision to utilize survey weights is driving our results. We unsurprisingly identify demographic differences across the two modes when we examine the 2012 data without weights. When we estimate the relationship between survey mode and satisfaction while adjusting for demographic characteristics without weights, the estimated coefficient is quite similar to those reported in the first column in Table 1: -0.153 ($p < 0.001$). A model without weights using the 2016 data returns a coefficient of -0.071 ($p < 0.001$). Full results of these analyses are presented in the supplementary material (Appendix E).

We further examine the robustness of our main result by retaining the original four category coding of satisfaction. We again observe a meaningful shift as a result of survey mode. Being interviewed via the internet leads to a decline of 0.244 ($p < 0.001$) in 2012 and 0.130 ($p < 0.001$) in 2016. Further, our substantive conclusions remain the same when explicitly taking the ordered nature of the satisfaction item into account. Full results of each of these analyses are presented in the supplementary material (Appendix F).

Finally, our main analyses did not adjust for partisanship, ideological self-identification, or vote choice, as each variable itself might be driven by survey mode. Reassuringly, we observe balance for each of these three variables across the samples in either year. Further, results from models that adjust for all three return similar results: the coefficient for mode is -0.147 ($p < 0.000$) in 2012, -0.084 ($p = 0.001$) in 2016, and -0.120 ($p < 0.001$) in a pooled model. Full results are presented in the supplementary material (Appendix G).

3. Extensions

Here we extend our analysis in two ways. First, we estimate models with alternative measures of attitudes about democracy. Second, we examine if the relationship between winner–loser status and satisfaction varies by mode.

3.1 Alternative measures of democratic attitudes

Given the ambiguity as to what precisely the satisfaction item measures, we examine if our result extends to other indicators tapping democratic goodwill. Lamentably, the ANES does not include measures of illiberal attitudes in either year. We are, however, able to examine political trust and

efficacy. Political trust is a dichotomous measure of if the respondent thinks the federal government is run for the benefits of a few, or for all; efficacy is measured using a two-item scale.⁴ Coding details are included in the supplementary material. As before, we estimate the model in each year as well as in a pooled model. Survey mode is related to both attitudes: those interviewed by the internet report lower levels of trust and less belief that their vote matters. We present results of these analyses in the supplementary material (Appendix I). While this analysis increases confidence that our results are not limited to the quirks of the satisfaction question, future research should more thoroughly examine mode effects on items more directly linked to illiberal attitudes—for example, support for military takeover or the preference for a less constrained executive.

3.2 Does the winner–loser satisfaction gap vary by mode?

If survey mode influences satisfaction, it is possible that it also influences the substantive relationship between it and known predictors. To assess this possibility, we examine if the well-established winner–loser relationship satisfaction varies by mode. To do so, we estimate a standard model of satisfaction examining the relationship between winner–loser status (coded by presidential vote) and satisfaction where we interact winner–loser status with mode. We control for interest, perceptions of the economy, ideology, income, education, and gender (coding instructions are presented in the supplementary material).

A significant coefficient for the interaction term would indicate the relationship varies by mode. Reassuringly, we fail to reject the null hypothesis in both years ($p_{2012} = 0.724$; $p_{2016} = 0.430$) and with a pooled model ($p = 0.663$). Full results are presented in the supplementary material (Appendix H). While it is worthwhile to further investigate if well-established relationships vary by mode, these results suggest scholars are on reasonably firm ground when examining substantive determinants of satisfaction no matter the mode.

4. Conclusion

Across different measurement and estimation strategies, we identify a meaningful difference in self-reported satisfaction with democracy between those interviewed face-to-face compared to over the internet. Respondents' expressed attitudes about democracy are influenced by the presence of an in-person interviewer suggesting there exists a norm to support democracy. Consequently, existing estimates of the public's satisfaction with democracy may be biased upward when relying on in-person samples. With that said, we stress that even internet respondents are, on average, satisfied with democracy. We also demonstrated that our result extends to two other items tapping attitudes toward democracy, political trust, and efficacy. While survey mode influences levels of satisfaction, a subsequent analysis demonstrated that reassuringly substantive relationships are not necessarily altered by mode—the relationship between winner–loser status and satisfaction is similar across both FTF and internet samples.

As scholars have charted the global retreat of democracy over the last several decades, attention has also turned to the public's commitment to democracy. While our results do not speak directly to issues of democratic consolidation or backsliding, our results indicate that expressed support for such institutional regimes is influenced by the manner in which such attitudes are measured. In particular, measures tapping public support of democracy conducted using in-person interviews may be prone to overestimation due to perceived social sanctions and “social image” issues. That is, a portion of the public has internalized the norm that democracy is “good” but it is less clear what precisely their expressed support entails.

⁴Respondents are asked if it matters who is in power and if their vote makes a difference.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2023.32>. To obtain replication material for this article, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HNYJTA>.

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