

Hard Choices: Reflections on the Design of the General Social Survey

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The GSS is a biennial personal interview survey of American adults consisting of a mix of sociodemographic background items, a rotating set of core attitudinal items crucial to the measurement of social trends, International Social Survey Program modules, and other large and small modules proposed by outside scholars with outside funding. It is a highly worthy project, and the current model is one of success. The current model is also the product of a series of compromises made over the history of the project. I think that it may be helpful at this point to consider aspects of the design from this perspective and to ask whether there might be other approaches with equal or greater appeal.

The GSS started out in 1973 as an annual survey. Other than 1979 and 1981, it continued as such until 1994, when it shifted to a biennial survey, but with a twist. Rather than a separate survey fielded annually, two surveys were packaged together and fielded at the same time in a single year. This design change resulted in substantial savings (training costs, listing expenses, etc.), and the GSS has continued as a biennial survey ever since. Should it? This question needs to be considered in relation to the speed of the changes the survey is intended to capture, some of which are quick and others not. It might be time to consider the survey in terms of its components and fielding them according to different strategies.

It is my understanding that the continuation of the biennial strategy is largely driven by ISSP obligations. The ISSP designs a topical module for use each year, which must be fielded that year or the next. In the current design, one of the ISSP modules is assigned to one of the two GSS samples, the other ISSP module to the other GSS sample, thus meeting the ISSP requirement. I am highly committed to the goals of the ISSP. I think it is essential that the GSS continue to participate in this international program. However, if the ISSP requirements could be met in some other way, if the components of the current GSS could be packaged somewhat differently, then it would be possible to consider other schedules for the administration of the non-ISSP portions of the GSS.

The GSS is a personal interview survey. This is one of the features of GSS design that gets the most scrutiny, because the costs of personal interviews have risen dramatically over the years. What is the rationale? Personal interview surveys are the “gold standard.” Coverage is better than for telephone surveys because households without telephones are included. Further, personal interview surveys generally have response rates that are higher than telephone surveys. Indeed, the GSS has achieved response levels that are the envy of the field, historically as high as 80% and recently at the 70% level. Importantly, the number, difficulty and complexity of topics that can be covered in a personal interview survey is greater than in a telephone survey. I remain convinced that a personal interview survey has a lot to offer the GSS project. I do, however, wonder whether this approach is needed for all of the components. For instance, the ISSP

modules might be fielded in some other way. Participating countries already use a variety of approaches so changing the mode for the ISSP modules is no threat to the international program. Opportunities might be taken to innovate in the administration of these modules. If the ISSP modules were removed from the personal interview, and fielded in some other way, it would no longer be necessary to field the non-ISSP portion of the GSS every two years. Note that I am not suggesting that ISSP be removed from the GSS—just that there might be more flexibility with respect to the various elements of the GSS.

The GSS aims to survey a representative sample of American adults. Until very recently, this was operationalized as English-speaking adults 18+ living in households in the US. In 1972, when the first survey was fielded, there was a good correspondence between English-speaking household population and the US population as a whole. However, this correspondence weakened over time as waves of immigrants entered the country (consequent to major legislative changes enacted in 1965). The omission of Spanish speakers was a particular problem. Funds for including them have been made available starting with 2006. I am very pleased by this change and feel strongly that Spanish translation should continue to be supported in the future. A major strength of the GSS is its focus on trends and changes at the population level. If we want to understand how American society now is similar to or different from American society ten years ago, twenty years ago, or thirty years ago, we need to include all of the relevant groups.

With respect to content, there is a major tension between continuing to ask questions (including response categories) the same way and making changes to question design to reflect advances in survey methodology. The GSS has emphasized the former for the purposes of replication and to guarantee comparability over time. As the GSS PIs have said on numerous occasions, “If you want to measure change, don’t change the measures.” My views on this depend on the component of the data collection. Specifically, I think that sociodemographic measures should be updated and response formats revised as needed. Why? It seems to me that the value of these variables for the GSS is (1) for identifying subgroups for trend analysis and (2) as background or predictor variables in analyses of core items or variables in the modules. Given these purposes, there is less need for questions and response categories to remain unchanged. If my goal were to track trends in the sociodemographic composition of the population, I would turn to some source other than the GSS. I am more sympathetic to the need to keep things the same when it comes to the core attitudinal items than for the sociodemographic background variables. Although there continues to be a need to review and update core attitudinal items, I think that the argument for leaning in a conservative direction is much stronger for these items.

With respect to the core, I would like to revisit a design change that was made some years ago, i.e., the introduction of the rotating core. In the rotating core, items are divided across three ballots—A, B, C. Each respondent is given two of the three ballots: AB, BC, or AC. Across two samples of roughly 1500 each, this yields responses for 1000 respondents on each core item, a sufficient number for tracking trends. However, this makes the data much more difficult to use for cross-tabulations and regression analysis. Prospective users look at the codebook and see that 1000 cases are available for analysis for a set of variables of interest to them. What they do not realize until trying to do their analysis is that the actual number of cases available may be 1000, but may also be 0 (listwise deletion with one item each coming from A, B, and C). I have seen even fairly sophisticated users flummoxed by this. This is a negative from the standpoint of

one of the important contributions of the GSS: the education of sociology students.

The modules comprise the final component of the GSS. The modules make it possible for the GSS to be topical, timely, theory-driven, and innovative in its content and methodology while at the same time achieving its other goals. As such, they are a vital component of the GSS and should be continued. How these modules are funded deserves some thought, though. NSF originally funded their development and implementation, but this has not been true for a while. In fact, externally funded modules have become a critical source of the funds needed to field each wave of the GSS. This is a burden for the PIs and adds a lot of uncertainty to the planning process. It also puts the Board of Overseers into an uncomfortable position. (What is their role with respect to fundraising?) I would like to see at least some of the topical modules centrally funded. Perhaps there could be an open competition for space in these modules sponsored by NSF, with proposals evaluated by the Board of Overseers.

In sum, the GSS can be seen as the historical outcome of decisions and compromises made over many years and for many reasons. I think it is time to revisit some of these. How important is it to field the survey biennially? My understanding is that participation in the ISSP is a major factor driving periodicity. Would it be possible to consider an alternative approach to fielding the ISSP? What is the most appropriate periodicity for the core items? If the GSS continues with a personal interview approach for its core content, but at less frequent intervals, would it be possible to ask all of the respondents all of the core items? Would the funds stretch to cover the development of specialized modules? What might be done to update the sociodemographic items (including response categories)? The current model is clearly one of success, but thinking about the future, other approaches should also be considered.

GSS Structure						
<i>Sample X (n=1500)</i>			<i>Sample Y (n=1500)</i>			<i>Time</i>
Sociodemographic Core						45 minutes
Rotating Core (each respondent gets 2 of the following 3 ballots):						
Ballot xA	Ballot xB	Ballot xC	Ballot yA	Ballot yB	Ballot yC	
ISSP- Year 1			ISSP- Year 2			15 minutes
Module 1			Module 2			15 minutes
Mini-Modules 1			Mini- Modules 2			15 minutes

(adapted from a graphic distributed by Mike Hout in spring 1999).