

The General Social Survey: Contributions to Economics and Recommendations for Future Dissemination

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The GSS And Its Contributions To The Economics Literature

Since its inception in 1972, the United States General Social Survey (GSS) has allowed economists to test and explore theories that otherwise would have not been possible. The rich array of data on individual and household characteristics measured in the GSS—particularly those captured through topical modules—have turned out to be a veritable gold mine for economists. A search on "General Social Survey" in the American Economic Association's "EconLit" bibliographic database results in some 76 articles in the economics literature that either cite and/or report results based on GSS data.^{*} An examination of this count shows that GSS data have been contributed across the subfields of economics, including for example public economics, labor economics, and the economics of religion.[†] While the absolute count of articles either citing and/or using GSS data seems low relative to the economics literature in general, it is also instructive to note the quality of the contributions. Of the 76 articles in the economics literature that either cite and/or use GSS data, 14 represent contributions in the top 36 economic journals.[‡]

^{*} See itemization of these articles in "The General Social Survey In the Economics Literature" GSSWorkshop Report (Price, 2007). The number of articles may be an undercount, as the search only includes articles in the economics literature that has the word/phrase "GSS" in the article abstract, and many listed articles do not include abstracts.

[†] This author, having research interests in the economics of religion (Granger and Price, 2007), has certainly benefited from the availability of GSS data.

[‡] The top 36 economics journals are based on the criteria of Scott and Mitias (1996) and as amended by (Price, 2005) are: *American Economic Review*, *Econometrica*, *Economic Inquiry*, *Economic Journal*, *Economica*, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, *International Economic Review*, *Journal of Business*, *Journal of Business and Economic Statistics*, *Journal of Development Economics*, *Journal of Econometrics*, *Journal of Economic Dynamics and Control*, *Journal of Economic History*, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *Journal of Economic Theory*, *Journal of Finance*, *Journal of Financial Economics*, *Journal of Labor Economics*, *Journal of Human Resources*, *Journal of International Economics*, *Journal of International Money and Finance*, *Journal of Law and Economics*, *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*, *Journal of Legal Studies*, *Journal of Monetary Economics*, *Journal of Money, Credit, and Banking*, *Journal of Political Economy*, *Journal of Public Economics*, *Journal of Regional Science*, *Journal of Urban Economics*, *National Tax Journal*, *Public Choice*, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *Rand Journal of Economics*, *Review of Economic Studies*, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, *Southern Economic Journal*.

As journals in the top of a ranking hierarchy are more likely to be cited (Kalaitzidakis, Theofanis, and Stengos, 2003), it is likely that the relatively low count of economics articles citing and/or using GSS data grossly understate the impact that articles have on economic science overall. In addition, 6 of these articles are listed as working papers of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). As NBER papers have a tendency to be cited in other economics journals, this is yet another source of downward bias in using EconLit counts of economics articles as a measure of the GSS' impact in economics.

Some Thoughts on Future Dissemination Strategies

As a recipient of tax-supported research dollars, GSS data are required to be publicly available at no cost to the user. It appears that to date, GSS data are freely available via the worldwide Web at: (1) Queens College (City University of New York (CUNY))§ (2) Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) and (3) University of California-Berkeley, Survey Documentation and Analysis (SDA) Archive. Surprisingly, the National Opinion Research Center (NORC)—organization that houses the principal investigators of the current National Science Foundation grant that supports the GSS—does not provide direct access to GSS data. Instead NORC provides links to one of the previously mentioned sites, and to others, some of whom will make the GSS data available in some portable format (e.g. Compact Disc) for a fee.

In general, worldwide web dissemination mechanisms for the GSS seem to warrant a passing grade of "fair". My recommendations for future web-based dissemination strategies are:

- *Data Format and Current Data.* There should be some consideration of introducing an option for data that can be processed with STATA. Increasingly the econometric/statistical software of choice for social scientists is STATA as it is a low-cost and powerful software for exploiting the tools of modern econometric/statistical methods in research. With the exception of the UC-Berkeley site, the web-based GSS download sites only allow for SAS and SPSS options. While an ASCII file is generated that can be imported into STATA with some effort, this is not an easy option for many potential users of GSS data. The web-based sites also have dissimilar end-years for the GSS data.*** While NORC indicates on its website that the GSS is available through the year 2006, the latest year for which one can freely download GSS data is 2004, and at the ICPSR site—1998. For a fee, one can apparently obtain GSS data through 2006 through the University of Connecticut's Roper Research Center. This is confusing and frustrating. The data should be made available to the public through the latest year possible.
- *Standardize Data Downloads.* Only the UC-Berkeley site appears to allow the user to select particular years of the data. If the others do, it is not apparent. Users of GSS data should be able to easily download variables of interest—particularly those in topical modules—and link them to similar variables in the same year. Currently, this is difficult to implement, and is only possible through the year 2004 at the UC-Berkeley website. The GSS should aim for standardizing data downloading that is similar to the ease of downloading census data at the University of Minnesota's Population Center—the Integrated Public Use MicroData Series (IPUMS).

*** See [http://soc.qc.cuny.edu/QC software/extract.html](http://soc.qc.cuny.edu/QC%20software/extract.html), <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS/> & <http://sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm>

Matching particular variables on individuals/households to a particular year is simple through the IPUMS website—something which should be possible with GSS data as well.

- *Provide Users with Updates.* One of the virtues with using IPUMS data is that by requiring users to register, users are constantly provided news about important updates. Currently, the web-based platforms for downloading GSS data do not require user registration, nor is there any way GSS users can learn about updates, unless apparently, they happen to browse the NORC website—which does produce a GSS newsletter. User registration with required email address would remedy this shortcoming and keep GSS users informed about important updates.

Conclusion

Economics has benefited from the GSS, as evidenced by the number of articles in the EconLit bibliographic database that includes "GSS" in the abstract. No doubt, the number of articles that meet this criterion understate the impact the GSS has had on economic science, as many of the contributions using the GSS are in high impact journals and written by highly cited authors. It is plausible that many more economists would use the GSS in their research if the web-based platform for downloading data were more user-friendly. Future improvements to GSS dissemination efforts should aim for such user-friendliness, and the web-based platforms for data access could be made comparable to that for accessing IPUMS data.

References

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