

Social Science Computer Review

<http://ssc.sagepub.com>

When Methodology Interferes With Substance: The Difference of Attitudes Toward E-Campaigning and E-Voting in Online and Offline Surveys

Harald Schoen and Thorsten Faas

Social Science Computer Review 2005; 23; 326

DOI: 10.1177/0894439305275854

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://ssc.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/23/3/326>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Social Science Computer Review* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://ssc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://ssc.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://ssc.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/23/3/326>

When Methodology Interferes With Substance

The Difference of Attitudes Toward E-Campaigning and E-Voting in Online and Offline Surveys

HARALD SCHOEN

Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

THORSTEN FAAS

Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Universität Duisburg-Essen, Campus Duisburg

For campaigners, and also attendant researchers, the advent of the Internet has challenged established ways of doing their respective campaign business. Practitioners, used to running local and media campaigns, can nowadays also resort to elements of web campaigning, while electoral researchers, used to running election studies based on personal or telephone interviews, can now employ online surveys to do their business. However, e-campaigning and online polling suffer from severe deficiencies. Based on online and offline surveys conducted in the run-up to the 2002 German election, we show two things. First, online surveys yield biased results; second, e-campaigning reaches only a tiny fraction of the electorate, which is due to not only the imperfect dispersion of the Internet but also a lack of interest in political web sites among voters. Taken together, the Internet is—at least for time being—confined to adding supplementary elements to the established procedures of campaigning and polling.

Keywords: online surveys; survey methodology; Internet research; election studies; Germany

For campaigners, and also attendant researchers, the advent of the Internet has challenged established ways of doing their respective campaign business. Practitioners, used to running local and media campaigns, can nowadays also resort to elements of web campaigning, while electoral researchers, used to running election studies based on personal or telephone interviews, can now employ online surveys to do their business. Expectations are considerable in both fields: Advocates of the Internet expect, for example, a shift from a so-called bystander democracy to a participatory democracy (Leggewie & Maar, 1998) in the age of the Internet in substantial terms. In the methodological field, Couper (2000) argued that “we stand at the threshold of a new era of survey research” (p. 464): Online surveys yield results in a rather short period of time while still being capable of reaching a large number of respondents.

Within this article, we want to challenge these optimistic outlooks to some extent and provide a realistic assessment of the new opportunities that the Internet provides. Our basic hypothesis is that yes, indeed, the Internet will change things; however, it will not completely overturn established procedures in the near future. Neither will future campaigns be solely (or even predominantly) run on the web, nor will (and should) surveys be conducted solely (or predominantly) online. Neither option fulfils the respective needs of users: e-campaigning

reaches only a tiny fraction of the electorate, online polling yields biased results. Hence, they are confined to being supplementary tools in the respective fields.

DATA

Testing the hypotheses requires—in terms of substance—data about the dispersion and the acceptance of the Internet and e-campaigning in the electorate. In terms of methodology, similar data collected offline and online is needed to test whether online surveys yield satisfactory (i.e., representative) results. The German Election Study 2002 fulfils these prerequisites. It contains several items about e-campaigning but also comprises different—online and offline—surveys. A total of three surveys were conducted in the run-up to the 2002 German federal election (see Table 1 for details). The first survey was a representative sample of Germany's population age 16 years and older as a whole. From August 12 to September 21, respondents were randomly selected using sample points, random routes, and last birthdays and then interviewed personally. In sum, the survey comprised 1,665 respondents, the response rate was 63.8%. The second survey was a representative sample of German Internet users. A total of 598 users were randomly selected from an access panel whose members were previously recruited in standard offline surveys. According to the literature, this is one of the most promising paths for conducting online surveys, as it is supposed to render representative results at least for the population of Internet users (Couper, 2000; Schonlau, Fricker, & Elliott, 2002). This survey was fielded from September 13 to September 21, the response rate was 74.2%, the survey mode was CASI (computer-assisted self-administered interview). Finally, a third survey was conducted as an open, unrestricted online poll—probably the most common kind of web surveys. Everybody could log on to www.wahlumfrage2002.de (*wahlumfrage2002* means electionsurvey2002) and fill out the online questionnaire from August 20 to September 22. In other words, participants recruited themselves, a total of 10,042 answered the questions of interest to us here (see Faas, 2003) for further details about this survey.¹ In terms of questions asked, the surveys included several items about the election campaign and e-participation but also, more specifically, about e-voting that we use for the following comparison.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

According to the literature on methodology (see, e.g., Dillman, 2000, pp. 353-358), the validity of online surveys (in terms of rendering representative results) can be seriously questioned. The bias (or even lack) of an appropriate sampling frame as a consequence of the digital divide is the most severe problem. As a result, men, young, better educated, and politically involved persons can be expected to be overrepresented in online surveys in general but even more so in open, unrestricted online surveys based on the self-selection of respondents.

These well-known distortions (see Alvarez, Sherman, & Van Beselaere, 2003; Berrens, Bohara, Jenkins-Smith, Silva, & Weimer, 2003; Gibson & McAllister, 2002; Sanders, Clarke, Stewart, Whiteley, & Twyman, 2002) are also present in our analysis, as Table 2 indicates: 75% of the participants in the open online poll are men, 79% of them have at least secondary education, and, on average, the respondents are only age 34 years. The same tendencies (although to a lesser extent) apply to the access panel-based survey, where the respective figures are 59%, 49%, and age 37 years, respectively. The bias becomes evident when these scores are compared to the ones that the representative survey renders: Here, only 52% are men, only 27% have secondary education, while the average age is 50 years.

TABLE 1
Details Concerning the Three Surveys

	<i>Face-to-Face Survey</i>	<i>Survey based on Access Panel</i>	<i>Open Online Survey</i>
Field time	August 12 to September 21, 2002	September 13 to September 21, 2002	August 20 to September 22, 2002
Respondents	1,665	598	10,042
Recruiting of respondents	Random selection based on sample points, random routes, and last birthdays	Random selection from a previously offline-recruited access panel	Self-recruiting without restrictions
Mode	PAPI	CASI	CASI
Response rate	63.8%	76.1%	—

NOTE: PAPI = paper-and-pencil interview; CASI = computer-assisted self-administered interview.

TABLE 2
Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Respondents of the Three Surveys

	<i>Face-to-Face Survey</i>	<i>Survey based on Access Panel</i>	<i>Open Online Survey</i>
Sex: % Male	52 (1.23)	59 (2.02)	75 (0.26)
Age: Mean	50 (0.44)	37 (0.54)	34 (0.08)
Education: % secondary education (respondents still in school are excluded)	27 (1.11)	49 (2.29)	79 (0.29)

NOTE: Standard errors in parentheses.

Obviously, from a mere sociodemographic point of view, online surveys yield heavily biased results. In the present context, however, the decisive question is whether substantial results also differ between the surveys. As can be seen from Table 3, this is indeed the case: The level of interest in the 2002 election campaign clearly depends on the survey one looks at. The public as a whole—as indicated by the face-to-face interviews—was only moderately interested in the campaign and talked to peers about the campaign only sometimes.² Concerning visiting campaign events and campaign web sites, the results are even more disenchanted: By and large, neither one reached the general public at all. In comparison, respondents of the access panel and especially respondents of the open online survey were significantly more interested and engaged. The latter ones followed the campaign intensively, talked to peers very often, visited campaign web sites at least sometimes, and at least rarely visited campaign events. These self-selected respondents of the open online poll appear to be campaign junkies, which does not really come as a surprise: After all, they must somehow become aware of the survey and decide to take part in it. Both are considerably more likely among people with a high interest in the campaign.

Taken together, were one to generalize results obtained from this subgroup to the public as a whole, one would strikingly overestimate interest in the campaign and campaign activity. Moreover, visiting *campaign web sites* is much more popular than visiting *campaign events* in this subgroup, while these activities are equally uncommon in the public as a whole.

TABLE 3
Campaign Activity and Use of the Internet for Political Purposes Among the Respondents of the Three Surveys (Mean Values)

	<i>Face-to-Face Survey</i>	<i>Survey based on Access Panel</i>	<i>Open Online Survey</i>
General interest in the campaign	0.16 (0.03)	0.40 (0.04)	1.22 (0.01)
Talk to peers about election	-.09 (0.03)	.51 (0.04)	1.18 (0.01)
Visit campaign events	-1.62 (0.02)	-1.42 (0.04)	-.78 (0.01)
Visit campaign web sites	-1.73 (0.02)	-1.02 (0.04)	.15 (0.01)
Search information about politics on the web	-1.01 (0.04)	-.59 (0.04)	.36 (0.01)
Visit web sites of political institutions	-1.25 (0.04)	-.84 (0.04)	-.12 (0.01)
Contact politicians or political institutions	-1.60 (0.03)	-1.36 (0.04)	-.90 (0.01)

NOTE: Standard errors in parentheses. Answers based on 5-point scales ranging from -2 (*very little / never*) to +2 (*very much / very often*), see Appendix for question wording.

Hence, the bias in sample composition distorts the conclusions not only about the level but also the kind of campaign activities among voters. The same (although to a somewhat lesser extent) is true for the results obtained from the access panel. In other words, the Internet as a survey instrument is not able to yield valid results about the role of the Internet in election campaigns.

Moreover, these considerable differences cannot (solely) be attributed to the differing sociodemographic composition of the samples. Controlling for age, sex, and education by means of a tree analysis, considerable differences between the three surveys remain, as Table 4 indicates exemplarily for the item visiting campaign web sites.³ For each sample, we observed the same tendencies: Men are more inclined to visit these sites than women, young people are more inclined than older people, people who are educated are more inclined than people with a lower degree of formal education. However, the overall differences between the three samples do not vanish after controlling for these sociodemographic features. Hence, the differences between the samples clearly must have other reasons than just different sociodemographic characteristics.

These findings are paralleled, when we turn to the Internet as a tool for (more general) political online activities. Respondents in the open online survey actively search for political information on the web, visit web sites of political institutions, or contact politicians or political institutions via the Internet much more often than randomly selected Internet users and especially than the public as a whole. Relying on the open online survey, one would obtain a much too optimistic impression of the political relevance of the Internet for the public. From a substantial point of view, the conclusion is skeptical, too: Obviously, the political role of the Internet is limited by the far-from-complete Internet penetration; in addition, the web users' unwillingness to use the web for political purposes contributes to the restricted role of the Internet in politics, as the results based on the access panel indicate.

Let us finally turn to the more specific question of electronic voting: Table 5 reveals that the general public does not hold an unequivocal attitude concerning e-voting as a general option for voting and as an alternative option for absentee voting. Internet users are more prone to approve of both proposals but are far from being enthusiastic about them. Compared to e-voting as an option for absentee voting, e-voting is less popular when it is proposed as a general option for voting. Turning to the open online poll, the respective findings may seem quite surprising at first glance: Those heavy Internet users and campaign junkies support e-

TABLE 4
Visiting Campaign Web Sites by Survey, Sex, Age, and Education (Mean Values)

	<i>All</i>							
Face-to-face survey	-1.73							
Access panel	-1.02							
Open online survey	+0.14							
	<i>Sex</i>							
	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>					
Face-to-face survey	-1.66		-1.81					
Access panel	-0.92		-1.17					
Open online survey	+0.20		-0.06					
	<i>Age</i>							
	<i>Younger than Age 40</i>	<i>Age 40 or Older</i>	<i>Younger than Age 40</i>	<i>Age 40 or Older</i>				
Face-to-face survey	-1.14	-1.77	-1.68	-1.87				
Access panel	-0.93	-0.92	-1.25	-1.04				
Open online survey	+0.27	+0.05	-0.05	-0.08				
	<i>Education</i>							
	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
Face-to-face survey	-1.72	-1.00	-1.85	-1.54	-1.81	-1.39	-1.92	-1.71
Access panel	-1.00	-0.87	-0.98	-0.85	-1.44	-1.04	-1.18	-0.83
Open online survey	+0.24	+0.27	+0.14	+0.02	-0.02	-0.06	-0.14	-0.04

NOTE: Answers based on 5-point scales ranging from -2 (*never*) to +2 (*very often*), see Appendix for question wording.

voting to a considerably smaller degree than respondents in the access panel. However, does this result really come as a surprise? Heavy Internet users are likely to be well aware of the technical deficiencies of e-voting-technologies, for example, the possibility of manipulation. Hence, it seems that this group is less enthusiastic about e-voting than the respondents of the access panel not despite its heavy Internet use but rather because of it. Taken together, e-voting is not very popular at the moment because of two factors. The number of Internet users is still too small, and technical difficulties exist. Consequently, even though the dissemination of the Internet may increase further at a rapid pace, e-voting will not become a popular alternative to traditional forms of voting as long as the technical problems of e-voting are unresolved.

CONCLUSION

“Clearly, we stand at the threshold of a new era of survey research, but how this will play is not yet clear” (Couper, 2000, p. 464)—and the same is true for electioneering. Both areas are already and will be further affected by the advent and ongoing dispersion of the Internet. The Internet is frequently used for collecting survey data and for campaigning. Our analysis reveals, however, that web-based campaigns reach only a tiny fraction of the electorate. In other words: Online campaigns cannot replace traditional campaign tools—they can, at best, add useful additional sources of campaign communication; for example, they may be ade-

TABLE 5
Approval of e-Voting Among the Respondents of the Three Surveys

	<i>Face-to-Face Survey</i>	<i>Survey based on Access Panel</i>	<i>Open Online Survey</i>
Facilitate e-voting as an option for absentee voting	0.09 (0.04)	0.88 (0.05)	0.68 (0.01)
Facilitate e-voting as a general option for voting	-0.13 (0.04)	0.61 (0.06)	0.36 (0.02)

NOTE: Standard errors in parentheses, answers based on 5-point scales running from -2 (*don't agree at all*) to +2 (*agree very much*), see Appendix for question wording

quate to reach certain subsections of the electorate at relatively low costs. Likewise, the results of online surveys are heavily biased; this holds for items that tap conventional ways of political participation and for questions regarding the Internet as a campaign tool. Hence, as far as the general public is to be analyzed, online surveys are no serious alternative to traditional techniques of data collection; however, they add another instrument to the social scientist's toolbox that might be useful for certain specific tasks such as, for example, pretesting or experiments. Consequently, the Internet is not and will not be the only instrument for election campaigns and survey research in the near future; however, it will be interesting to see how campaigners and researchers make use of this attractive and problematic instrument.

APPENDIX

Question Wording

Interest in the campaign

"Back to the general federal election 2002: How closely do you follow the campaign? Very closely, closely, somewhat, not very closely, not at all." Coding was from -2 (*not at all*) to +2 (*very closely*).

Campaign Activity

"There are several ways to occupy oneself with an election campaign. Please tell me how often you have done the following in the present campaign: very often, often, sometimes, rarely, never?"

- talk to friends, relatives or peers about the election
- visit campaign events
- visit campaign websites

Coding was from -2 (*never*) to +2 (*very often*).

Use of the Internet for political purposes

"We would like to ask you about the use of the Internet in more detail. The Internet can be used for many different purposes, for example, for political purposes. Using this list, do you use the Internet for the following purposes very often, often, sometimes, rarely or never?"

- Search information about politics on the web

APPENDIX (continued)

- Visit web sites of political institutions, for example, political parties, citizens' action groups, authorities, deputies
- Contact politicians or political institutions, for example, by sending an e-mail

Coding was from -2 (*never*) to $+2$ (*very often*).

Attitudes on e-voting

"Nowadays, there is much talk about whether citizens shall be offered the opportunity to cast their votes via the Internet. Provided that e-voting is completely safe, what is your opinion on the following statements? Please use this scale."

- Voters who cannot cast their vote at the polling station shall be provided the opportunity not only to cast a postal vote but also to vote via the Internet.
- Voters shall be provided the opportunity to vote via the Internet, regardless of their ability to cast a vote at the polling station.

Coding was from -2 (*strongly disagree*) to $+2$ (*strongly agree*).

NOTES

1. The survey comprised a core module and three further optional modules. The questions we use in this context were part of one of the optional modules. Although the core module was filled out by more than 30,000 participants, only about 10,000 also filled out the optional module of interest here.

2. Still, even the face-to-face survey can be expected to overestimate interest in the campaign. This can be seen from the well-known phenomenon of overreporting (see, e.g., Silver, Anderson, & Abramson, 1986), which is also present in this survey: 77.7% of the respondents of the face-to-face survey said that they would "definitely vote," another 11.9% said that they would "probably vote." Compared to that, the final 2002 turnout was 79.1%. Part of this can be explained by social desirability (some survey respondents think that they are expected to vote, so they say they will, even if they will not). However, it is also the case that people less interested in politics (and thus less likely to vote) do not take part in election studies more often than others. However, this dropout phenomenon should affect all three surveys used here—and especially the open online survey based on self-selection.

3. The same tendencies also apply for all other items analyzed here.

REFERENCES

- Alvarez, R. M., Sherman, R. P., & Van Beselaere, C. (2003). Subject acquisition for web-based surveys. *Political Analysis, 11*, 23-43.
- Berrens, R. P., Bohara, A. K., Jenkins-Smith, H., Silva, C., & Weimer, D. (2003). The advent of Internet surveys for political research: A comparison of telephone and Internet samples. *Political Analysis, 11*, 1-22.
- Couper, M. P. (2000). Web surveys. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 64*, 464-494.
- Dillman, D. A. (2000). *Mail and Internet surveys: The tailored design method* (2nd ed.). New York: John Wiley.
- Faas, T. (2003). *www.wahlumfrage2002.de: Ergebnisse und Analysen* [www.electionsurvey2002.de: Results and analysis]. Bamberg, Germany: University of Bamberg.
- Gibson, R., & McAllister, I. (2002, August 26-September 1). *The future of national election surveys? Evaluating online election surveys in Australia*. Paper presented at the 98th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA), Boston, MA.
- Leggewie, C., & Maar, C. (Eds.). (1998). *Internet und Politik. Von der Zuschauer- zur Beteiligungsdemokratie* [Internet and politics: From bystander to participatory democracy]. Köln: Germany: Bollmann.
- Sanders, D., Clarke, H., Stewart, M., Whiteley, P., & Twyman, J. (2002, August 26-September 1). *The 2001 British Election Study Internet Poll: A methodological experiment*. Paper presented at the 98th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA), Boston, MA.

- Schonlau, M., Fricker, R. D., Jr., & Elliott, M. N. (2002). *Conducting research surveys via e-mail and the web*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Silver, B. D., Anderson, B. A., & Abramson, P. R. (1986). Who overreports voting? *American Political Science Review*, 80, 613-624.

Harald Schoen is currently working as a research associate and lecturer at the Department of Political Science of the University of Mainz. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Mainz. His recent publications include a monograph on vote switching in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany and several articles on elections, electoral campaigning and voting behavior. He can be reached by e-mail: harald.schoen@politik.uni-mainz.de

Thorsten Faas is currently working as a Ph.D. student and teaching assistant at the Department of Political Science of the University of Duisburg-Essen, Campus Duisburg. He holds an M.Sc. from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). His published work includes articles on elections (and election studies), voting behavior and political communication, for example, in German Politics, European Journal of Political Research, and European Journal of Communication Research. He can be reached by e-mail: TF@thorsten-faas.de