

Evaluation Area: Impacts

Topic of Paper: Other

Focus of Paper: Methods

Title: The Impact of Survey Incentives on Response Rates and Data Quality: May the Odds be Ever in Your Favor

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Pre-election polls had some high profile misses in 2016 – the Brexit vote in Great Britain and Donald Trump’s victory in the US presidential election. The failure to accurately predict election outcomes illustrates the increasing challenges facing the survey research industry. Survey response rates are at an all-time low. Still, research has shown that even surveys with response rates lower than 10% can produce results that are representative of their target population when the results are weighted by demographic characteristics. However, many have wondered how low survey response rates can go before the results cannot be trusted. Recent election polling failures suggest that response rates may have reached this point.

Survey research is an important tool for energy efficiency program planning and evaluation. Though it is extremely rare for energy efficiency survey results to face a comparison to a real world measure like election polls do, program evaluators and administrators should share the concerns of pre-election pollsters when it comes to survey quality. Our evaluations and the resulting program design decisions are only as good as the data on which they are based.

In this paper, we examine whether survey incentives are an effective tool to increase survey response rates. We present the results of a model that makes use of approximately 250 surveys to estimate the impact of incentives and other survey characteristics on response rates. We explore the effectiveness of different incentive types such as a small payment to all respondents who complete the survey versus a sweepstakes where only a few lucky respondents receive a larger payment. For sweepstakes incentives, we examine whether surveys with multiple smaller prizes that have better odds produce higher response rates than those with a few big prizes and poorer odds. Finally, the effect of incentives likely differs for different target populations. Based on our results, we will provide recommendations for the types of surveys that will produce the greatest return on incentive investments.

Following the presentation of the model results, we examine whether surveys with higher response rates more representative of the target population than those with lower response rates. Some of these results make use of survey experiments where we split the sample and provide an incentive to one half of the respondents and no incentive to the other half. We can then compare the surveys on key study variables of interest in addition to the traditional demographics.

All results will be available by March 1, 2017. The research-based solutions presented in this paper will provide valuable information to program administrators and evaluators who make use of surveys.