

Using Online Panels for Survey Research

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Web-based interviewing with online panels has many advantages over more traditional methods of survey research, the most important of which are speed and lower costs. With costs increasing and response rates dropping for traditional RDD telephone surveys, it's no wonder that online panels have emerged as a more popular alternative, particularly for academic research. A simple search for the phrase "online panel" by year on Google Scholar yields 3,770 hits for all of 2023, up from 2,060 five years earlier and 1,100 hits in 2013.

But while they might seem like a good alternative, online panels have their own shortcomings, beginning with a bewildering array of vendors and lots of uncertainty about representativeness and response quality. Although web-based panels are considerably cheaper than other modes of interviewing, the vast majority are "opt-in" panels where members join voluntarily, typically with the understanding that they will receive some form of credit, points, or money for responding. And while these panels are quite large and diverse, there's an obvious problem with potential self-selection bias that is neither ignorable nor fixable by using larger sample sizes or adding population adjustment weights. We're also finding that "bot" programmers, people who write automated scripts for responding to online surveys, are getting more sophisticated and harder to detect (Goodrich et al 2023). In addition, many online panels have problems with inattentive respondents, namely those who click through a survey as quickly as possible just to get whatever reward is offered as an incentive (Olbrich et al 2024; Stagnaro et al 2024). We've even seen cases where a panel member will use key-logging scripts and multiple identities to generate duplicate responses (right down to the letters typed in for text responses) all coming from different IP addresses and landing in your dataset with perfectly contiguous start and end times. The respondent then gets paid for each duplicate record added to your data.

But all is not lost. The good news is that there are a number of high-quality web panels based on random sampling of the population, both here in the US and abroad. These probability-based panels are much more meticulous and transparent about their methods for recruiting, monitoring and managing panel members. The average cost-per-interview (CPI) has come down to a point below the cost of the cheapest RDD telephone surveys 30 years ago. Even the opt-in panels have taken steps to be more transparent, although some have begun using routers based on propensity matching and quotas so that samples match census parameters on key demographics. These rigged match rates are then put forward as evidence that the panels are "representative." The bottom line is that opt-in panels are fine for most undergraduate research or for running randomized experiments. However, if what you need is a good, representative sample that will be respected by academic journals, then you need to go with a

recruited panel. At the same time, academic journals have become more open than ever to publishing research using opt-in panels. In these cases, one is more likely to see the term “fit for purpose” instead of “representative” to describe (and perhaps justify) the use of an opt-in panel.

The table on the next page lists several recruited and opt-in panels. There are many more opt-in panels that could be listed, but the ones in the table are the most popular among academic researchers. I’ve included a column for “Hits on Google Scholar,” but it’s less an indicator of quality and more an index of academic tolerance. Many of the names listed for contacts are people I have known for years or met recently as colleagues, so I am happy to approach any of them on your behalf with questions, ideas, or requests for cost estimates.

Note that some panels prefer to program and host the online survey instrument themselves; others require or will allow you to use your own questionnaire package (e.g., Qualtrics) for which they will furnish the respondents. Some panels have an omnibus option, for cases where you want responses for just two or three questions (with demographic variables and weights appended); others will only run surveys as stand-alone projects. Some recruited panels also include members who will not or cannot respond on the web, despite, in many cases, being offered a tablet and free Internet service. AmeriSpeak, SSRS and Gallup can supplement web interviews with telephone or mail responses from non-Internet households. Most of the opt-in panels and a few of the recruited panels have published their responses to [ESOMAR 37](#)¹, a set of questions intended to render their sampling, recruiting, data collection and weighting methods more transparent. Finally, some panels (such as RAND’s ALP, Gallup and USC’s UAS) allow linkage through a common unique ID number from your survey to data from past surveys that are available from their online archive. If you use these organizations for your survey, your data will then become part of their archive after an embargo period.

Another potential issue to consider is panel tenure (Cornesse et al 2023). Data from the NORC AmeriSpeak panel will generally include information such as length of time on the panel and total surveys answered. This can help researchers assess whether panel conditioning is a factor in biasing survey response.

There are also several R packages for generating sample weights for non-probability panels (Cobo et al 2024). The STATA package *ipfraking* is also a good method for generating post-stratification weights based on population parameters (Kolenikov 2014).

If you have any questions or concerns about panels or using Qualtrics for your next online survey or experiment, please contact me or Naila Rahman by phone (8-5660) or by email (efreelan@princeton.edu; nrahman@princeton.edu).

¹ For a full list of survey panel vendors that have signed on to the ESOMAR initiative, click [here](#).

Recruited Panels

Name	Size	Managed by	Contact	Year started	Allow interviews via external questionnaire platforms?	Omnibus?	Phone/Mail option for non-internet households	Recruitment method	Hits on Google Scholar since 2019	ESOMAR questions available online
AmeriSpeak	66,000 in 58,000 households	NORC at the University of Chicago	Dan Costanzo (costanzo-daniel@norc.org)	2014	Yes	Yes	Yes	Mail using address-based sampling (ABS)	1,250	Yes
Understanding America Study	15,000	USC Dornsife Center for Economic & Social Research	Tania Gutsche (tgutsche@usc.edu)	2014	No	No	No	Mail using ABS	1,140	No
KnowledgePanel	60,000	IPSOS (previously GfK)	Nick Bertoni (nick.bertoni@ipsos.com)	1999	No	Yes	No	Mail using ABS	3,030	Yes
American Life Panel	11,000	RAND Corporation	Robert Bozick (Robert_Bozick@rand.org)	2007	No	Yes	No	Mail using ABS and RDD telephone	2,570	No
SSRS Probability Panel	10,000	SSRS, Inc	Kyle Berta (kberta@ssrs.com)	2018	Yes	Yes	Yes	Weekly national RDD telephone omnibus	89	Yes
The Gallup Panel	100,000	Gallup	Jenny Marlar (jenny_marlar@gallup.com)	2004	No	No	Yes	RDD telephone and mail using ABS	306	No

Opt-In Panels

Name	Size	Managed by	Contact	Year started	Omnibus?	Hits on Google Scholar since 2019	ESOMAR questions available online
Bovitz	20,000+	Bovitz	Rick Konopka (Rkonopka@bovitzinc.com)	2014	No	212	No
Dynata	70 million worldwide	Dynata	Frank Markowitz (Frank.Markowitz@dynata.com)	2004	No	2,670	Yes
Lucid/CINT	170 million worldwide	CINT	Jack Gulvas (jack.gulvas@cint.com)	1998	No	10,510	Yes
YouGov	1.2 million in the US	YouGov	Ashley Grosse (ashley.grosse@yougov.com)	2004	Yes	7,530	Yes
Mechanical Turk	>500K worldwide	Amazon		2005	No	35,600	No
Prolific	200,000	Prolific		2014	No	17,600	Yes

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