

The GSS, the ANES and the PSID & GSS Methodology Comments Prepared for the NSF Workshop on Planning the Future of the GSS

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The GSS, the ANES and the PSID

If the only thing that unites ANES, GSS, and PSID is that major funding comes from NSF, this is not a strong basis for interaction. However, if there are common problems, some mechanism for cooperation and exchange may be desirable. Currently, the GSS Board includes Jon Krosnick, an ANES PI, and Bob Schoeni, a PSID PI. This facilitates communication among the three surveys but is not a long term arrangement.

There are a number of issues where sharing information across surveys can be beneficial to the GSS.

1) **Panel Design and Recontact.** As the GSS undertakes a panel, it is useful to have regular contact with other surveys that do panel data collection like the PSID. IRB issues about recontact of panel members, for example, was an issue that became apparent largely because Bob Schoeni is currently on the GSS Board and had encountered similar issues in the discussions surrounding recompetition of the PSID.

2) **Website Enhancements.** Another area where communication across the surveys is useful and has benefited the GSS is in areas such as website design. For example, at one of the GSS Board meetings, Jon Krosnick demonstrated features of the ANES site to GSS Board members.

3) **Contextual Information Appended to the GSS.** PSID had developed rules and procedures for use of restricted access files, such as those with contextual information appended, that could be modified by GSS.

4) **GSS Expertise in Attitudinal Measurement.** Benefits of contact can also flow from the GSS to other surveys. For example, surveys like PSID, which in the past has not had a great deal of attitudinal information especially on non-economic topics, can benefit from the long history of item development in the GSS.

I serve on both the GSS and PSID Boards and there are differences that seem important to highlight.

The PSID, like the GSS, faces the challenge that NSF does not provide sufficient funding for the conduct of the survey. The PSID's funding diversification strategy has been quite different from the GSS, however. The PSID has managed to get sizable funding from NIHD and from NIA. The NICHD funding was largely secured by adding on a new, in-depth assessment of PSID

children (The Child Development Supplement to the PSID). With this strategy, the PSID PIs have maintained control over the coherence and intellectual content of the whole survey.

An intergenerational panel survey like the PSID may be better able to attract NIH dollars but GSS might consider whether something more akin to the PSID strategy might enhance the scientific value of the GSS. The GSS panel may eventually make this more likely, though the panel may have to extend for more than four years to attract funding from sources such as NIH.

The PSID faces pressures to diversify the PIs involved – to be more inclusive of researchers beyond the PSID PIs. In many ways, the GSS has accomplished much greater PI diversification through its selling of topical module time. There is a balance that must be struck between control of content and openness and the potential innovation that might come from greater inclusion of the broader research community.

Another difference between the PSID and the GSS is in staffing. The PSID seems to have more staff dedicated to the survey than GSS. The PSID also has rotated in a new co-PI in recent years with Bob Schoeni. It retains continuity with the continuation of Frank Stafford as PI but also seems to have given attention to succession. This is an important issue for the continuance of a high quality GSS as well.

GSS Methodology

From 1972 through 2006, the GSS has monitored trends in U.S. attitudes, behaviors and attributes and provided high quality data on social change in the U.S. A key issue is therefore how to continue the time series replication of core items for monitoring change while also being responsive to new developments in the survey research field and attentive to costs and benefits of engaging in the “status quo” versus innovations in data collection methodologies. Following is a list of some of the issues that this workshop might address:

1. In-person Interviews. The use of in-person interviewing in the GSS is a unique feature of the survey, as many other surveys have moved to telephone interviewing. Use of in-person interviews with respondents no doubt keeps GSS response rates high relative to surveys that use other modes. In-person interviews also may enhance the goal of replication of the time series, as changes in mode may introduce noncomparability in the trends in the core items on the GSS. However, in-person interviews are costly. The case for strict adherence to in-person interviewing techniques is especially strong if it can be demonstrated that comparability would be compromised, data quality would decrease, and response rates would decline with any other mode of data collection.

In this workshop, as in the workshop conducted before the recompetition of the ANES, it would seem important to discuss mode of interview. The notice of recompetition must include specifications to potential applicants about this important issue. An outcome of the ANES workshop was the recommendation to NSF to address the issue of “The value of maintaining primarily face-to-face interviewing of the core component.” Is the use of in-person interviewing

absolutely required to ensure the integrity of the GSS? How much or how little mode experimentation should NSF encourage in the recompetition notice?

2. **GSS Panel.** In 2006, the GSS inaugurated a prospective panel. Cases from the 2006 GSS will be targeted for reinterview and reinterviewed cases in 2008 will be slated for reinterview a second time in 2010, creating a 3-wave panel covering a four-year time period. The GSS has never had a panel before and it will no doubt take a few years to evaluate how worthwhile the GSS panel is and whether the current design is optimal. Hence, a design issue for the recompetition is whether or not the recompetition notice will specify that anyone submitting a proposal must maintain the panel design that was implemented with the 2006-2008 survey. Or, will the recompetition allow latitude to rethink the introduction of the panel into the GSS? A further complication that the panel design adds, as became clear at the Spring 2007 GSS Board Meeting, is that 2006 GSS respondents were told they might be recontacted by NORC. Any other survey firm does not have permission for recontact.

3. **Assessment of Nonresponse and Data Quality in the GSS.** The GSS Board has been especially interested in having information recorded by interviewers or about the conduct of the interview, including record of calls, appended to the GSS data set in order to permit methodological work on data quality and nonresponse bias. A more complete set of variables about the actual contact with the household will be available in 2006 than has previously been the case. Record of call will not be appended because, unless interviewer training is enhanced, the recording of contact attempts is not currently systematic enough across interviewers to be coded and usefully analyzed. One issue that workshops participants may wish to discuss is the amount and type of information about the interview that should be routinely included on the GSS data file.

4. **Maintaining Innovations.** There have been a number of innovations in recent GSS survey rounds that need to be continued. For example, the GSS innovated in sub-sampling nonrespondents for follow-up in the 2004 survey. This seems to have worked well, represents an innovation that comes from access to leading sampling statisticians and survey operations at NORC, and represents an important dimension on which to assess those who enter the recompetition. Another innovation was the introduction of a Spanish language version of the GSS for the first time in 2006. This no doubt enhances the representativeness of the GSS sample. If enhancements such as this are considered critical to maintaining the quality of the data collection, these would need to be requirements for future GSS data collections.

5. **ISSP Modules.** The GSS has included ISSP modules and the GSS Board and current PIs have been active members of the ISSP community. To the extent that this involvement enhances the scientific usefulness of the GSS, this component of the GSS program would also be an important feature of the GSS recompetition notice.

6. **Topical Modules.** Currently, NSF funding does not cover the full cost of conducting the GSS. Additional resources are raised by selling time on the survey in the form of topical modules. On the plus side, this allows a broad range of researchers to have access to a high quality survey and it encourages proposal development to fund content on the GSS. On the negative side, this means that scientific coherence and content do not always drive the decisions

about the questions that are included on the GSS; the content of topical modules is a compromise between available funding for content and scientific merit of the content. Also, considerable PI time is spent fund raising. The GSS Board provides feedback on items and modules, with ultimate veto power over poor quality modules. However, there are limits to this oversight, given the need to fund the survey. Also, often the funding of modules comes in so late that there are data quality and methodological implications. For example, there is often inadequate time to do cognitive testing of new survey content before the pretest.

7. Methodological and Substantive Experiments in the GSS. Some GSS Board members have expressed concerns that GSS engaged in more methodological innovation in earlier years than it does currently. In addition, in the workshop before the ANES recompetition, it was pointed out that more methodological experiments (e.g., question wording experiments) than substantive experiments are done in the ANES. This is probably also true of the GSS. If it is the case that methodological experimentation is declining and there is little experimental manipulation that addresses substantive issues, this may be especially problematic at this juncture. There is growing interest outside the field of sociology (e.g., in behavioral economics) in experimentation and in the feasibility of embedding experiments in surveys like the GSS, with cross-sections of the population, rather than with college students in laboratory settings. Should innovations along these lines be encouraged in the resubmission notice?

8. Data Accessibility. The ease with which data can be accessed is extremely important. Currently, work to enhance the GSS website is underway. Continued improvement in data access and in the GSS web presence must be part of the mandate for any future GSS proposal.