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Transitioning the European Social Survey to a self-completion data collection approach

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CSDI Workshop, Skopje, 8 April 2025

europeansocialsurvey.org

ESS is a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ESS ERIC)



ESS and mode transition

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- The first 9 rounds of the ESS (2002-2018) were conducted exclusively with face-to-face interviewing to prevent mode effects (Jowell et al, 2007)
- A self-completion approach was unexpectedly implemented by 9 countries during the pandemic-affected Round 10, following piloting (Fitzgerald, 2021)
- After a recommendation by an ESS commissioned strategic review (Sturgis et al, 2020) – and the successful implementation of self-completion at Round 10 – it was decided to transition all data collection to self-completion
- ESS Round 12 will be mixed-mode in each country. Half the achieved sample interviewed face-to-face, half by self-completion (web and paper) - want to provide data users with a clear estimate of differences between the old and new modes
- ESS Round 13 (and onwards) will use only self-completion data collection (web and paper)

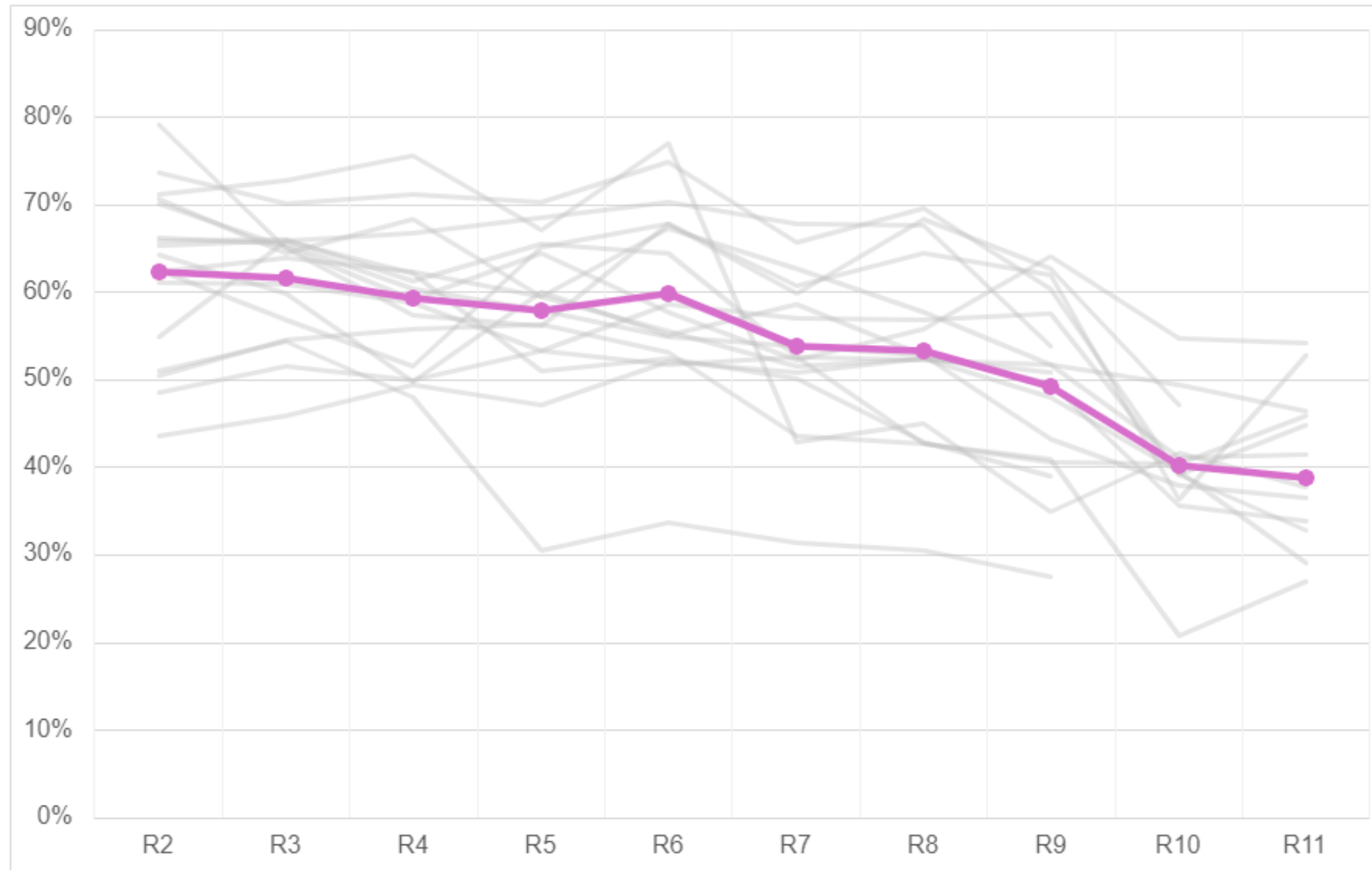
Reasons for moving away from face-to-face fieldwork

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- Face-to-face interviewing in Europe has become more difficult to implement
 - Higher costs that are continuing to increase (Roberts et al, 2014)
 - Falling response rates, particularly in last 2-3 rounds
 - Fewer (or zero) fieldwork agencies bidding for the ESS
 - Fewer experienced interviewers available / high turnover
 - Much longer fieldwork periods (e.g. over a year)
- ESS has observed clear evidence of interviewer effects (Beullens & Loosveldt, 2016), exacerbated by fewer interviewers working more cases

ESS face-to-face response rates: 2004-2024

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Increasing viability of self-completion data collection

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- Self-completion becoming more viable cross-nationally
 - Rising internet penetration supports use of web
 - ESS (and other surveys, e.g., EVS, GGS) experience shows reasonable response rates can be achieved with self-completion in Europe (e.g., over 30% in most cases)
- With worsening data quality in face-to-face, self-completion has some advantages:
 - Reduction in social desirability bias
 - No interviewer effects
 - Expectation of more consistency across countries
- The ESS could have allowed different approaches between countries, but opted for a uniform switch given the ESS mission to provide cross-national comparability

Core elements of ESS's self-completion approach

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- Countries may send invitations and reminders in the post (**postal-first**), or fieldworkers deliver them (**fieldworker-first**), or a combination
- Web and paper questionnaires are offered to respondents across 4 mailings/contacts: an invitation letter and 3 reminders
- Paper questionnaire either given to all respondents within a country with invitation letter and later reminder (concurrent design) or only once with a later reminder letter (sequential design)
- Fieldworkers' role is to deliver materials and encourage participation, never to conduct interviews (knock-to-nudge)
- Unconditional monetary incentives are required for postal-first, strongly recommended for fieldworker-first. Conditional incentives strongly recommended for both approaches
- Nonresponse follow-up strategies required (fieldworker visits, SMS reminders, extra targeted mailings)

Preparing mixed-mode source questionnaire

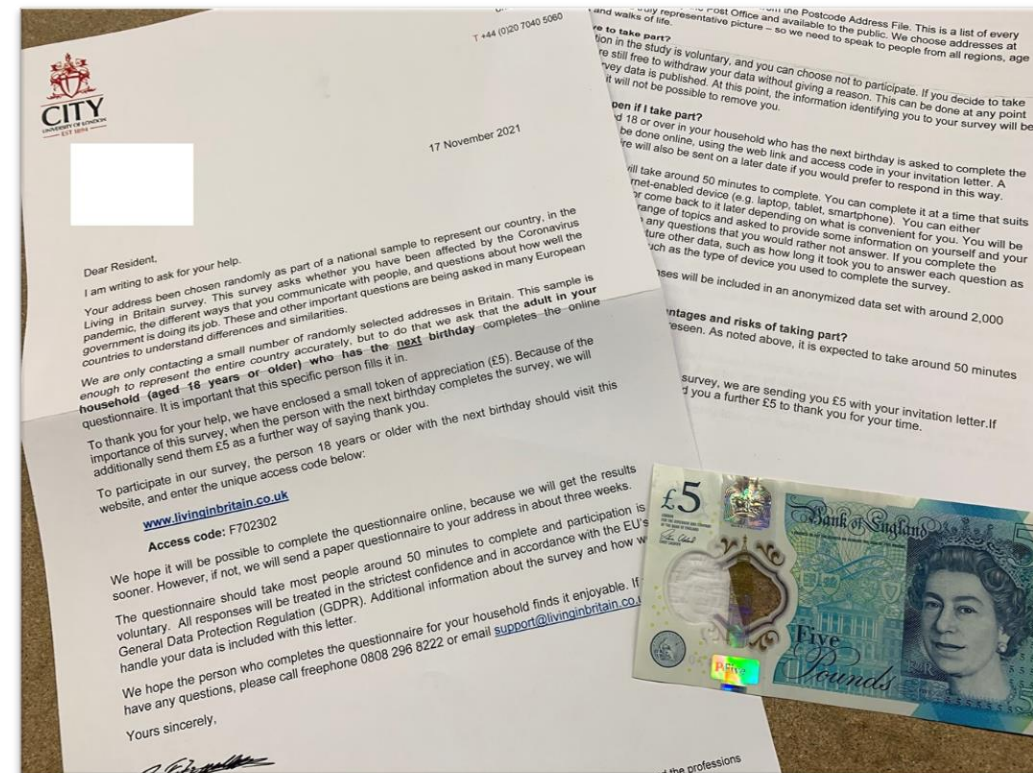
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- Web and paper questionnaires as similar as possible to face-to-face – balance between retaining best approach for each mode and consistency across modes/over time
- Minor changes – e.g. introduction text, instructions, some question wording
- Scale orientation (e.g. 0-10) differs - paper (horizontal) web (vertical)
- Self-completion respondents told they can leave any question blank (no DK/REF options)
- Shorter education lists; occupation measurement still based on open questions – non-response likely to increase and quality of measure likely to decrease (under review for future rounds)
- New (gender neutral) version of the Human Values Scale

Self-completion contact materials

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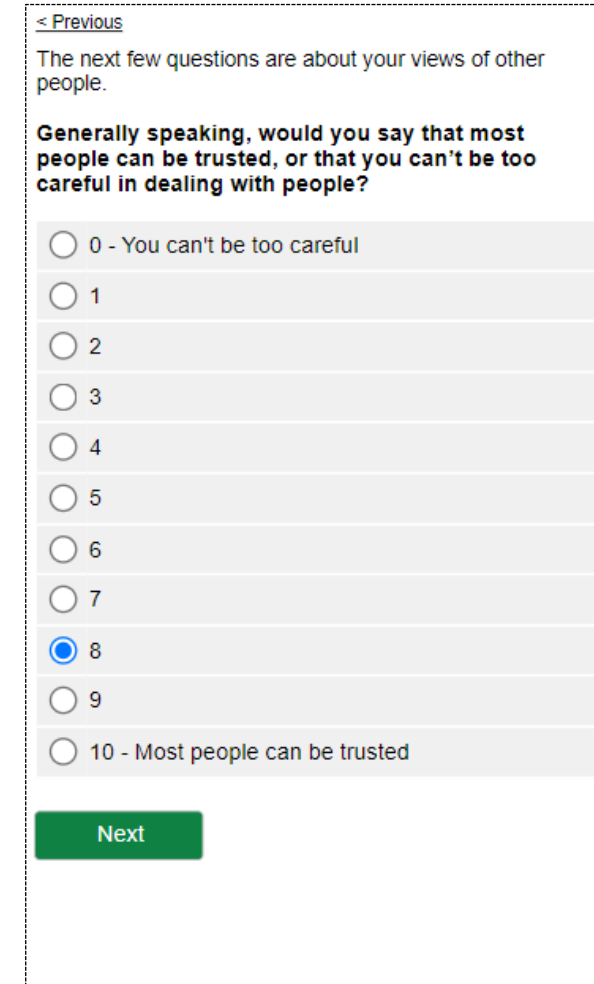
- Invitation letters and reminders were designed in collaboration with Don Dillman in 2020
- University/institutional logos essential
- Letter refers to the first questionnaire topics, providing a link between materials; questionnaire updated to start with interesting topics
- Advise sending cash with invitation mailing (otherwise voucher)
- Varying envelopes per mailing essential – size, colour, use of logos



Centralised self-completion platform

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- Centralised self-completion platform developed and hosted by Centerdata – gives CST central control of most design elements – e.g. more flexibility to adapt web survey look and feel (e.g. compared with Qualtrics)
- General principles include one question per page, where possible avoiding any vertical scrolling, and clean & simple design
- National teams enter translations in TranslationCTRL tool; then exported to web and paper templates for each language – questionnaire look the same across all countries
- Platform also covers sample upload, progress monitoring, data entry, and data production



The screenshot shows a survey interface with a dashed border. At the top left is a link "< Previous". Below it is a paragraph: "The next few questions are about your views of other people." This is followed by the question: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?". Below the question is a vertical list of radio buttons numbered 0 to 10. Option 0 is labeled "0 - You can't be too careful" and option 10 is labeled "10 - Most people can be trusted". Option 8 is selected, indicated by a blue dot. At the bottom of the form is a green button labeled "Next".

Developing the paper questionnaire

- Initially unclear whether the hour-long ESS questionnaire could be converted to self-completion – particular concerns with paper
- Two-column layout was recommended (Dillman, 2000), saved space and ended with far less pages overall

We are very grateful that you are taking the time to complete our questionnaire.

Please complete the questionnaire using **BLACK** or **BLUE** INK.

If you do not know the answer to a question or would prefer not to give an answer, you may leave the question blank.

If you make a mistake or change your mind, please completely fill the box or circle  to show the mistake and then tick the correct answer.

ANSWER THIS QUESTION FIRST:

Are you the person aged 18 or over in your household who has the next birthday?

1 ☐ Yes

2 ☐ No

→ If you are the person aged 18 or over in your household who has the next birthday, go to section A

If you are not this person, please pass this questionnaire to the person aged 18 or over in your household who has the next birthday and ask them to complete it.

SECTION A

► In this first section we will ask you about a variety of different topics starting with pandemics.

A1 Is it more important to prioritise public health or economic activity when fighting a pandemic? Please tick any circle  from 0 to 10, where 0 means it is much more important to prioritise public health and 10 means it is much more important to prioritise economic activity.

Much more important to prioritise public health Much more important to prioritise economic activity

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A3 Is it more important for you personally to follow government rules or to make your own decisions when fighting a pandemic?

Much more important to follow government rules Much more important to make your own decisions

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A4 How important is it for the UK to close its borders when fighting a pandemic?

Not at all important Extremely important

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A5 How important is it to restrict people's movement between different parts of the UK when fighting a pandemic?

Not at all important Extremely important

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

► Now some questions on a different topic. Please answer all questions based on how things are today, even if the pandemic means that this is different to usual.

A6 On a typical day, about how much time do you spend watching, reading or listening to news about politics and current affairs? Please give your answer in hours and minutes. For example, if you did this for one hour and twenty minutes you would enter:

HOURS **MINUTES**

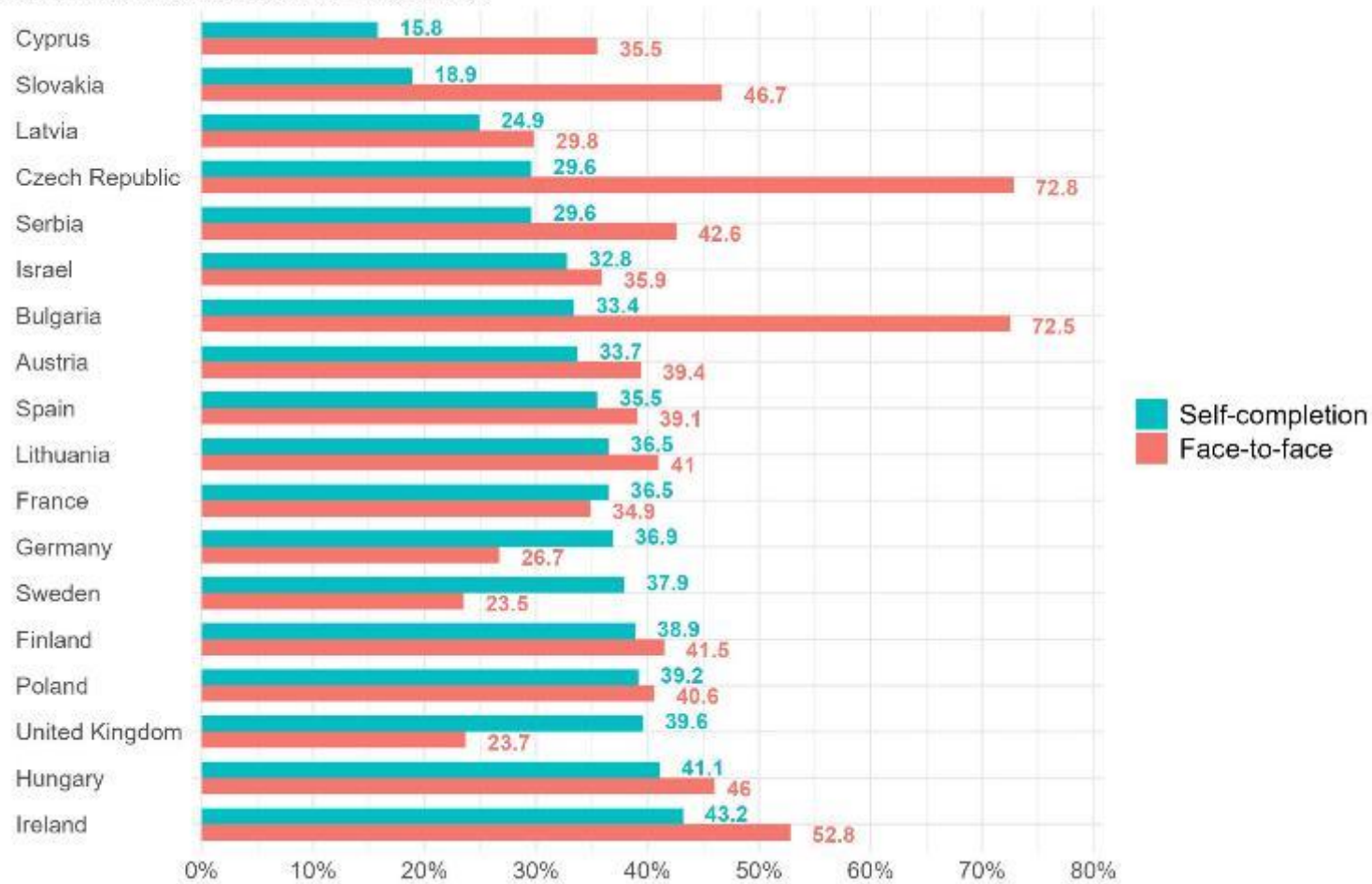
Outcomes so far

Encouraging response rates for self-completion

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ESS recent response rates by mode

Data from most recent data collection in either mode



- Self-completion response rates between 30% and 40% in most countries (but see room for improvement)
- Some countries see a big drop from face-to-face – but often countries with quality concerns over face-to-face interviewing
- Share of paper completions varies but typically at least 20-30% even with sequential approach

Sample composition

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- Some country differences, but in general self-completion sample representativeness as good as for face-to-face approach
- Self-completion may slightly overrepresent women in some countries
- Age composition potentially more accurate with self-completion than face-to-face
- Self-completion tends to overrepresent higher education groups (in some countries markedly), but inclusion of paper questionnaires improves balance
- Balance between maximising the highest overall response rate and maximising sample representativeness – scope to do more to adapt national designs in future to improve the latter (e.g. targeting strategies, balance of web and paper)

- ESS commissioned a special advisor (Peter Lugtig) to compare a) ESS9 vs ESS10 for countries that did and did not switch mode, and b) R10 parallel run experiments in Britain and Finland
- General finding is that there are small but notable differences in means between face-to-face and self-completion observed for around 20% of the core questionnaire
- Self-completion may result in more ‘accurate’ data for some measures (e.g. reduction of social desirability bias) – but needs further exploration
- Little or no mode effect is observed for variances and covariances
- Country-specific mode effects are also observed, both in strength and sometimes in direction

- Mode switch a necessity; ESS questionnaire suited to self-completion (incl. paper)
- Some negatives with self-completion (e.g. loss of mode-consistent time-series, higher nonresponse for some parts of questionnaire) but should also convey benefits (loss of interviewer effects, reduced social desirability bias, more central control/consistency, increased supply of fieldwork providers)
- Promising early results but room for improvement – higher response rates(?), scope for more targeted approaches to increase sample representativeness
- Will need to guide users through the transition – inclusion of mixed-mode round will provide valuable evidence
- Starting to look at how to develop and improve the approach longer-term – may include inclusivity measures, greater targeting to improve sample balance, and questionnaire adaptation

Thank you





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Appendix