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Citation: Hanson, T., Fitzgerald, R., Ghirelli, N. & O'Muircheartaigh, S. (2022). Delivering the European Social Survey During COVID-19: reflections and future implications. Paper presented at the 2022 AAPOR Annual Conference, 11-13 May 2022, Chicago, USA.

This is the presentation version of the paper.

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Delivering the European Social Survey During COVID-19: reflections and future implications

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AAPOR Conference, Chicago, 13 May 2022



europeansocialsurvey.org

ESS is a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ESS ERIC)



Introduction to ESS and Round 10

Introduction to the European Social Survey (ESS)

- Academically-driven cross-national survey measuring attitudes and behaviour across Europe
- Conducted every two years since 2002; Round 10 nearing completion
- 38 countries have participated in total; 32 at Round 10
- For Rounds 1-9: Fully face-to-face approach across all participating countries; consistency of methodology important
- Central fieldwork specification and central planning/oversight – but decentralised fieldwork contracting and delivery
- Random probability sampling; mix of sample frames across countries
- 1,500 target effective sample in most countries (800 in small countries)
- Interview length c. 1 hour

ESS Round 10 and COVID-19

- Fieldwork for Round 10 of ESS was due to run from September 2020 to January 2021 using the usual face-to-face approach in all countries
- COVID-19 pandemic presented major challenges to deliver usual face-to-face approach
- Contingency measures introduced:
 - Continuing to prioritise a face-to-face approach where possible – but with greater flexibility on timings and other adaptations to specification
 - Preparing a self-completion approach to be implemented by any countries that could not deliver face-to-face fieldwork
 - (No mixing of modes permitted)
- Of the 32 countries participating at Round 10:
 - 23 using face-to-face approach
 - 9 switched to self-completion

List of countries by approach

Face-to-face			Self-completion
Belgium	Hungary	Portugal	Austria
Bulgaria	Iceland	Slovakia	Cyprus
Croatia	Ireland	Slovenia	Germany
Czechia	Italy	Switzerland	Israel
Estonia	Lithuania	United Kingdom	Latvia
Finland	Montenegro		Poland
France	Netherlands		Serbia
Georgia	North Macedonia		Spain
Greece	Norway		Sweden

Face-to-face approach

Adapted face-to-face fieldwork processes

- Key objective was to ensure that face-to-face fieldwork could be delivered safely in context of pandemic – risk assessment process and questionnaire developed, approval needed before fieldwork start
- Video interviewing offered as back-up option to in-person interviewing
- Fieldwork period extended – initially to end of 2021 but several countries have needed to continue beyond this
- More flexibility with maximum interviewer workload, contact requirements, and reserve samples

An extremely challenging round for face-to-face fieldwork

- Almost all countries have taken longer to complete fieldwork than expected (average 5-6 months); temporary fieldwork suspensions in some countries
- Major issues with interviewer capacity in lots of countries – not fully clear if this is a temporary issue or if there will be longer-term impacts
- Some countries experienced lower response rates than in previous rounds – but not consistent across countries
- Mixed experiences with video interviews but very productive in some countries (approach being retained for next round)

Self-completion approach

Overview of self-completion approach

- Push-to-web approach
 - Web survey programmed in Qualtrics
 - Paper self-completion questionnaire (c. 36 pages)
- Sequential (web  paper) approach in most countries
- Two possible data collection approaches
 - Postal recruitment only
 - Fieldworker-assisted
- Mostly unclustered samples; mix of sample frames; for address-based samples, person with next birthday asked to complete survey
- Invitation letter and three reminders
- Unconditional incentives required (cash strongly preferred); conditional incentives recommended
- Follow ups with non-responders in some countries
- Expected questionnaire length c. 50 minutes
- Fairly limited adaptation from face-to-face questionnaire
- Approach informed by development and experimental work

Self-completion countries

Postal recruitment:

Sequential

- Austria
- Serbia
- Cyprus
- Spain
- Germany
- Sweden
- Latvia

Concurrent

- Poland

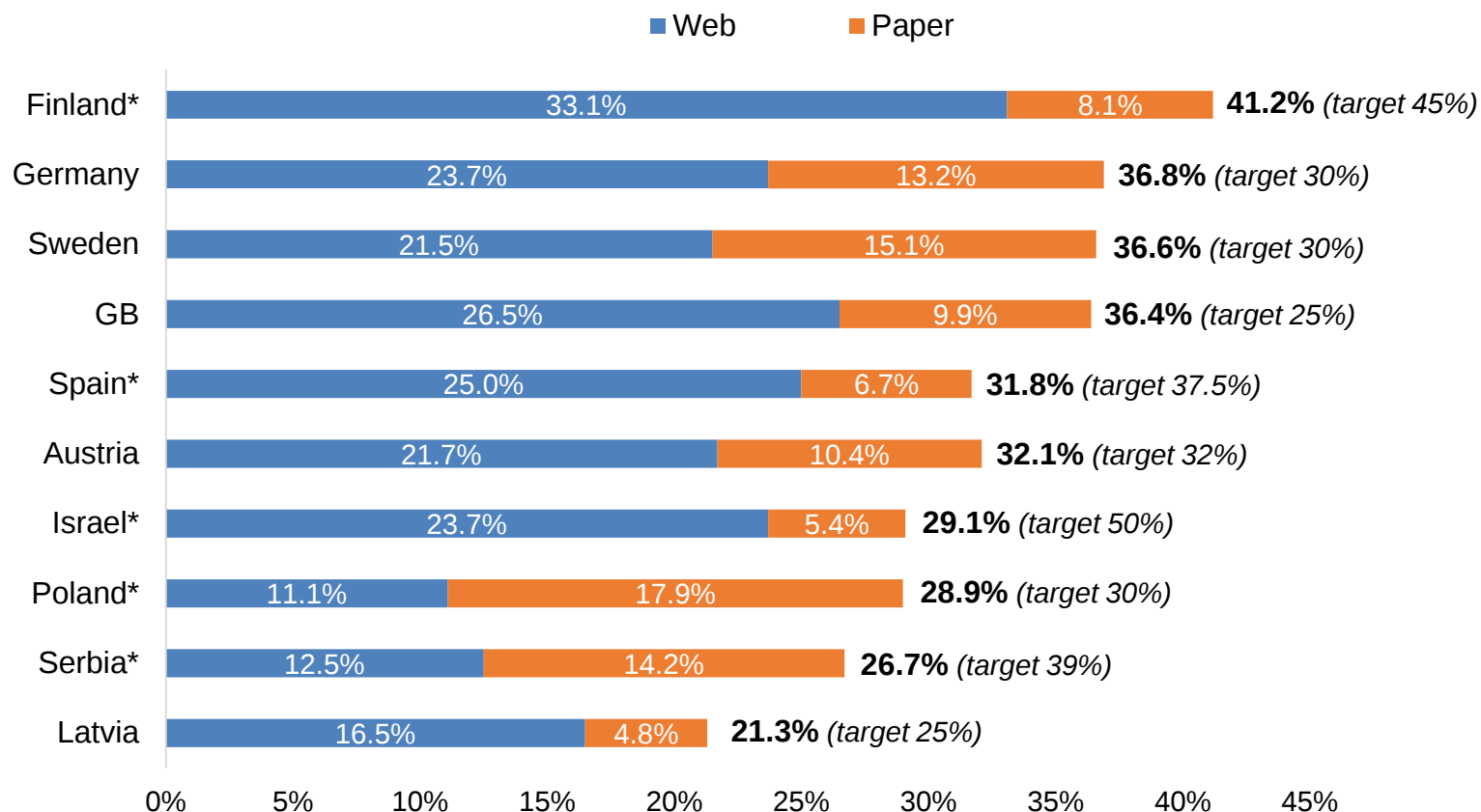
Fieldworker-assisted recruitment:

- Israel

Self-completion experiment alongside face-to-face Round 10 fieldwork:

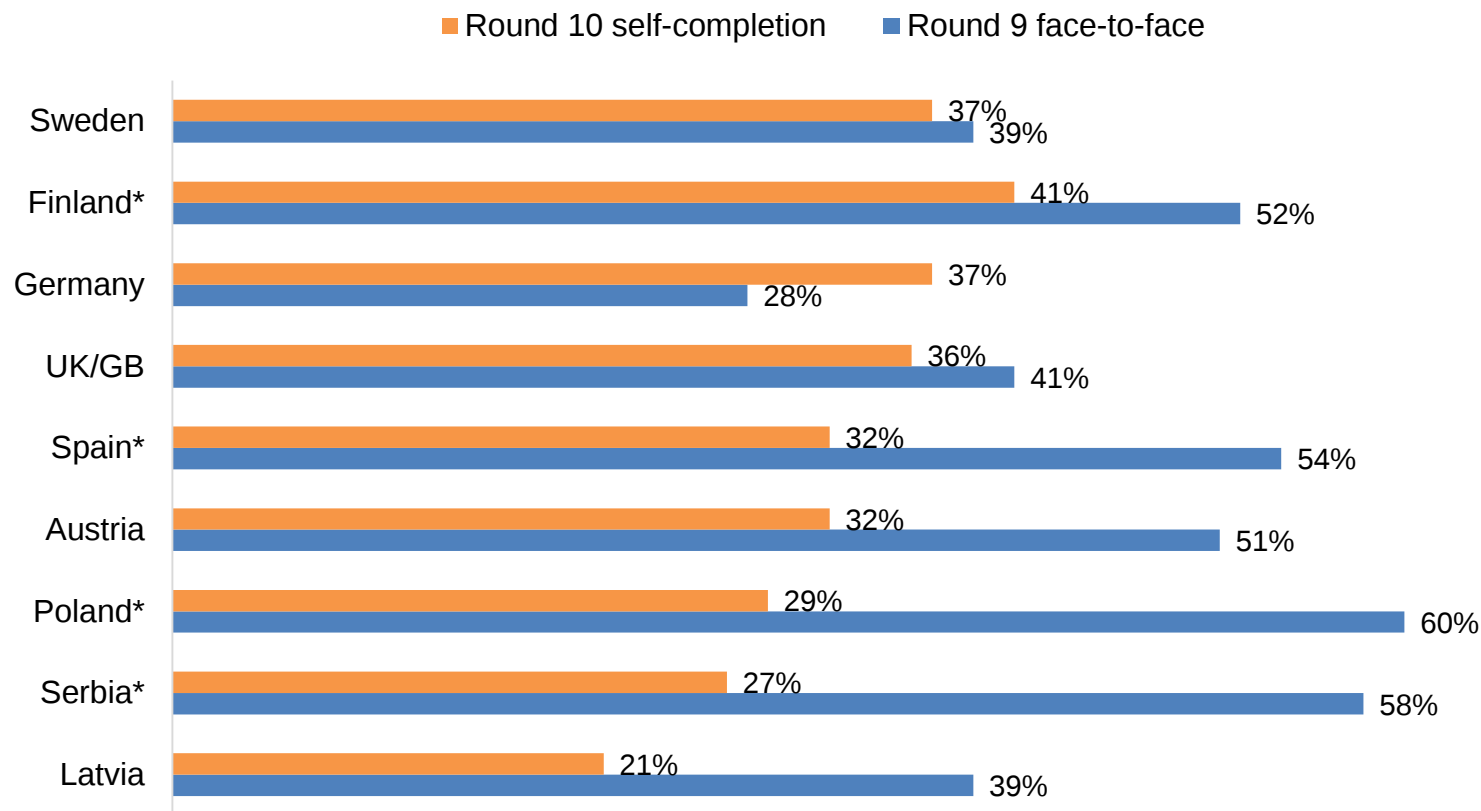
- Great Britain
- Finland

Current self-completion response rates (preliminary)



* Data collection still in progress

Comparison with recent face-to-face response rates



* R10 self-completion data collection still in progress

Overall positive experience

- Response rates were often better than expected – and in some cases close to (or higher than) rates achieved with face-to-face approach in previous rounds
- Demonstrated that you can achieve reasonable self-completion response rates with a long questionnaire (50 minutes)
- Self-completion model (central protocol, central preparations of instruments, national delivery of data collection) has generally been effective
- Instruments developed effectively – e.g. reduced paper questionnaire to a 36 page 2-column design
- Still need to assess sample representativeness, data quality, and comparisons with face-to-face data

Challenges of the self-completion approach

- Response rates were still often lower than those achieved with face-to-face approach
- Practical issues with and objections to incentives in some countries
- Unreliable postal systems in some countries (may become bigger issue?)
- Extra reliance/workload on central team compared with face-to-face approach

Reflections and next steps

Expect future switch to self-completion for ESS

- Not expected to be a quick transition – face-to-face approach for next 2-3 rounds before switch to self-completion
- Question of whether all countries switch together or we allow a phased transition – former is methodologically preferable but may present issues for some countries (e.g. how much longer face-to-face fieldwork will be feasible for)
- Transition much more straightforward in some countries than others – in some, self-completion response rates may be considerably lower than face-to-face, and cost-savings may be limited (or non-existent)
- Also need to consider management model (including software platforms) – optimal division of tasks between central ESS team and national teams

Considerable work to prepare for transition

- Work required to adapt the questionnaire to optimise to self-completion – detailed questions on education & employment, reducing length of scales?
- Web-only approach unlikely to be acceptable in (any?) countries – limitations with paper will remain and need to be managed
- Need to consider accessibility – e.g. low literacy groups
- Assessing effectiveness and need for fieldworker-assisted approaches
- Developing optimal approaches to incentives, mailings, etc. and getting consistent compliance with these across countries
- Question of whether parallel runs are required in all countries before full transition

Acknowledgements

- ESS Core Scientific Team
- ESS National Coordination Teams
- Don Dillman (Design Consultant)
- NatCen Social Research UK (paper questionnaire design)
- Ivor Knox and Nick Moon (GB self-completion experiment)

Thank you



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