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Limits and virtues of a web survey on political participation and voting intentions.
Reflections on a mixed-method search path

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Old and new sociological survey tools in the Digital Age. A focus on the Web survey

- The Internet offers new opportunities for empirical research and represents a great chance for many sociological topics (one of these is **political participation**), considering the majority of citizens are made up of Internet users.

1. Transfer on the Web of some **traditional methodologies** (primarily the questionnaire)
2. Development of **innovative data collection and new analysis tools**

- Generational gap: only young people use the Internet in almost all cases, even if the "digital divide" is gradually going to be reduced.

- Excessive circulation of investigations, opinion polls, market research, etc. have made the voter-citizen elusive and uncooperative, less inclined to be interviewed.

Doing research to evaluate the survey approach: a voters-based study

- Two close surveys were carried out, one in September 2017 and the other one in February 2018, reaching about 850 cases in the first case and about 1,400 units in the second one, with similar percentages over the whole block of variables and with stable connections among them.

- The aim is to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of a web survey on the participation topic, showing particular attention to the strategic choices and decisions which have positive effects on the data quality, in a mixed method approach.

Some reflections

- **Particular attention towards data quality** (design of data collection tool, pretest and data analysis).

- We have the **numbers to analytically describe and deepen opinions, attitudes, values and social practices** related to the most significant Italian electoral targets (Left area, Right area, Five Star Movement, Non-voting area, Indecision area), in addition to the typical socio-demographic and economic variables.

- **The offline use of the questionnaire** (approximately one fifth of the interviews for each survey) **has been an effective solution for reaching a marginal voter** who still exists in Italian society (often elderly and with a low level of education): the **non-user of the Web.**

About respondents

Effects of the **principle of maximum freedom**:

- **fidelity** and **quality** of the collected data

- maximum **use of the time** fixed for data collection: a subject is free to choose when to reply to the questionnaire in the unit of time

- **active participation**: respondents can interact with the posts containing the link of the questionnaire, by adding a positive/negative reaction towards the initiative of research and/or the sponsoring institution. They can comment; start a debate with the research team and/or other respondents; share or discredit other people's arguments; write privately to the institution that initiated the investigation; contribute to the circulation of the research initiative.

But on average, the performance of these surveys is normally less than 1% of the reached contacts.

Facebook and Social Research.
The steps of the political participation survey

1. A post containing the link to the questionnaire was published on the Facebook institutional page of the Department of Communication and Social Research of Sapienza University of Rome.
2. The post was previously sponsored in order to reach social profiles as heterogeneous as possible. These profiles were based on social extraction charateristics, professional activity, level of education, hobbies and interests.
3. The post was also shared by other online platforms and channels (Telegram, Messenger, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Mailing lists, ecc.).

a. Facebook is the most used platform in Italy
b. Facebook is particularly suitable for the treated topic; the election campaign for the 2018 Italian general election took place, for all parties and candidate leaders, mainly on this Social Network.

Dimensions in analysis: values, sense of legality, idea of social justice, trust in the institutions, social resentment, social problems perceived as urgent, political orientation and electoral behaviour over time, traditional forms of political and social participation, forms of online political participation and hybrid styles.

Measures for improving data quality - 1

The research team has developed different **measures to obtain reliable data and the largest respondents' catchment**, not only from the strictly quantitative point of view (the numerical consistency of the sample), but also with reference to its heterogeneity regarding the strategic variables in the study of political participation theme (statistical coverage).

- The **scales of attitude** originally prepared with scores from 0 to 10, were brought back to a 0-5 range, in order to optimally display each possible mode of response, even from smartphones.
- Team has improved the **wording** and the **formulation of pre-coded answers**.
- It worked on the order and the **number of questions**, as well as on the **closure of some questions**, etc.
- It tried to identify some **Facebook groups** connected with social activities and diversified interests, having the electoral targets as a point of reference. It was not easy to penetrate into these groups, especially for increasingly restrictive rules on privacy and spamming.
- The **sponsorship of the post**, spread throughout the whole research timeframe with a medium economic investment, had contained the initial distortion of the sample, which was introduced by the initial sharing mode (the post was related to the university network/to the local context of the Lazio Region).

Measures for improving data quality - 2

The evaluation of the first survey results allowed to refine the questionnaire of the second survey, comparing the data of the two research rounds.

- We improved the text of questions and answers in the direction of **clarification** and **simplification**
- Sometimes we changed the **order of items/of replies** in case of unreliable data
- We eliminated items and response modes in case of redundancies, of excessively unbalanced data, of distortions linked to social desirability, and also in the direction of **thinning** and **agility of the instrument**.
- The **accompanying post of the link** (with the explicitation of issues, institutional subjects involved, time required for compiling, etc.) has been prepared in a very accurate way. The post has been "placed at the top" within the Department page for the entire duration of research, the same time span in which the team has constantly monitored the input data and motivated individuals to participate.
- The module we prepared for the completion of the questionnaire has **graphic characteristics** that make it aesthetically pleasing.
- The **number of questions** is not excessive
- There are numerous **indications for the correct filling of the questions**. Technology in use intervenes in order to reset the different erroneous and partial forms of compilation.

The <u>advantages</u> of online data collection

- **Containment of the research costs on several levels**: sampling tools, human resources employed, printing of questionnaires/making phone calls, territorial mobility of interviewers, etc.

- **Spreading of the data collection instrument** in a large and variegated territorial context

- **Automatic transformation** of the collected inputs into information (records) of a data matrix

- **Accuracy** of the data collected (absence of errors of insertion or compilation, containment of missing values), as well as the possibility of **monitoring the results *in itinere***.

The disadvantages of online data collection

- **Statistical non-representativeness of the samples**, due to the fact that not all the population uses the Internet and Facebook

- **Mechanisms of auto-selection** and **effect "ball of snow"** triggered by the (uncontrollable) sharing online system. The borders of the universe of Facebook users are not defined and are constantly evolving

- No coincidence between the **Social network world** and the respective **universe of voters** present in a given territory (system of basic features of Facebook users is not known in a precise way).

- Possibility of **multiple compilations** of the questionnaire by a unique subject

The disadvantages: a scheme

There are many **distortions**: those **due to the applied techniques** (standardized questionnaire published on the Internet) and some other **distortions related to the topic** (let's think to resentment towards politics in this historical moment, or to the distrust of some voters, or to the need for privacy on the personal intentions of voting, etc.).

We can talk about a **negative combination of "technical effect" and "theme effect"**; there are *electoral targets difficult to contact*, sometimes impossible to reach. These are the elderly, the non-internet users, the *right* and extremist voters, people with low degree of study, foreigners. On the other hand, we can observe young people, subjects with a high level of education, *left* voters, people who are interested in politics and well-informed (it emerges *a highly motivated "respondent-type"*, who is sensitive to research initiatives and interested in politics).

Concluding notes: Online data collection is not enough

It can be concluded that **the only assumable perspective is the mixed-method approach**, combining an offline data collection instrument with one else online (same questionnaire, same mode of administration), in order to address the problem of coverage of absent or under-represented targets.

- The statistical non-representativeness of the sample gives way to a **strong representativeness regarding the substantial plane**. In considering the aim of securing a numerical consistency for each of the electoral targets, we have obtained the maximum heterogeneity of socio-demographic and economic variables.

- All this has been done to accurately investigate values, opinions, perceptions, behaviours in their synergy, with the purpose of identifying **electors' styles** and **profiles** which are prevalent and recognizable in our society. The statistical non-representativeness of the sample certainly does not interfere with the **theoretical deepening of the theme of political and social participation**, neither with the **testing and refining of the instruments of data collection**, nor with the **activity of conceptualization and operation**, with the study of social trends, or with the **identification of interconnections among variables at multivariate level**.

- A description, a typing and an accurate interpretation of data is a valuable and fundamental basis also for the **building of explanatory models** and for **identification of predictive factors**.

An interesting quotation

"If (...) probabilistic sampling is irreplaceable in research situations in which it is intended to estimate precisely what is the numerical consistency of the diffusion of certain traits within a given population, as when we made opinion polls, the assessment of the relations among variables can require to privilege a comparative logic rather than generalizing, aimed, for example, to compare groups of subjects with opposite action orientations (...) and to establish which are contextual, relational and individual elements which make their courses of action so different" (Mauceri, 2003)

Thank you for your attention!

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