



Nonresponse in Cross-national Surveys Results of the European Social Survey

Philippens Michel

Billiet Jaak

1. Introduction

As cross-national research becomes more important to underpin policies of international organisations and governments, the need for valid and reliable cross-national survey data increases. A very important threat to the validity of cross-national comparisons is nonparticipation in surveys. In a review on literature pertaining to nonresponse in cross-national surveys, Couper & De Leeuw (2003) comment: "*only if we know how data quality is affected by nonresponse in each of the countries can we assess and improve the comparability of international and cross-cultural data.*" Despite their obvious importance, nonresponse issues are largely ignored in most cross-national surveys. In fact, the strict standards that are applied to the evaluation of national surveys are often suspended when it comes to cross-national studies (Jowell, 1998).

The European Social Survey (ESS), an academically led cross-national social survey, represents an interesting exception. In the ESS, much attention was spent to standardizing and optimising fieldwork procedures. In addition, nonresponse and fieldwork processes were carefully documented and monitored. These data on nonresponse outcomes and fieldwork procedures were gathered both at aggregate and individual (sample unit) level and offer a unique possibility to study the nonresponse problem in the context of cross-national surveys. The present paper presents the main results of the analysis of these data. We will first describe the effects of nonresponse in the context of cross-national surveys. Next, the way the ESS dealt with the nonresponse problem will be discussed; we then present nonresponse outcomes across all participating countries of the ESS. In a next section, an attempt is made to relate differences in response between countries to differences in fieldwork practice. A discussion on the relevance and consequences of the results for cross-national survey practice will conclude this paper.

2. Effects of nonresponse in cross-national surveys

The most important consequence of nonresponse in surveys is the risk that survey estimates might be biased. Bias due to nonresponse is a function of the response rate and the differences between respondents and nonrespondents. This means that conclusions will be biased only if nonresponse is selective and if respondents differ from nonrespondents on the survey estimates. To illustrate this, consider the following formula for the respondent mean (mean based on answers of respondents):

$$\bar{y}_r = \bar{y}_n + \left(\frac{m}{n}\right)[\bar{y}_r - \bar{y}_m] \quad (1)$$

where (m/n) is the percentage of sample members that doesn't participate in the survey- i.e. the nonresponse rate and \bar{y}_r , \bar{y}_m , \bar{y}_n are respectively the respondent, nonrespondent and sample mean. In the European Social Survey we can expect substantial differences between respondents and nonrespondents. Many of the variables covered in the first round of the ESS survey (social participation, political interest and involvement, civic duties) have previously been found or are believed to correlate substantially with survey participation (Voogt & Saris, 2003, Groves & Couper, 1998). Accordingly, we expect that nonparticipation in the ESS will likely cause biased estimates and will limit generalizability to each population.

In cross-national research such as the ESS, the focus is however not on simple descriptive statistics such as the country-mean but on the analysis of *differences* between country-means (or proportions). The following formula illustrates the effects of nonresponse on survey estimates of the difference of two country means:

$$\bar{y}_{1r} - \bar{y}_{2r} = (\bar{y}_{1n} - \bar{y}_{2n}) + \left(\frac{m_1}{n_1}\right)[\bar{y}_{1r} - \bar{y}_{1m}] - \frac{m_2}{n_2}[\bar{y}_{2r} - \bar{y}_{2m}] \quad (2)$$

The subscripts 1 and 2 indicate country 1 and country 2. This formula shows how country-differences in respondent means will not be biased if the respondent means are affected by the same amount of nonresponse bias in each of the countries (Groves & Couper, 1998, Couper & De Leeuw, 2003). In case one is dealing with two countries with equal nonresponse rates, there is no bias if and only if nonrespondents differ from respondents in the same way for both countries. If the nonresponse rates are not equal across countries, estimates will not be biased if there are no differences between respondents and nonrespondents in both of the countries. In order to illustrate the magnitude of nonresponse bias in estimates of differences of country means we consider a short **hypothetical** example (see Groves and Couper, 1998, p. 8-9 for a similar example). In this example we will examine differences between two country means where the statistic of interest is a proportion (say for example the proportion of persons that frequently meets friends). Figure 1 treats the case in which the proportion that frequently meets friends among respondents in the first country equals $\bar{y}_{1r} = 0.4$ and the proportion that frequently meets friends among respondents in the second country is $\bar{y}_{2r} = 0.6$. This is fixed for all cases in the figure. For reasons of simplicity we have assumed that the differences between respondents and nonrespondents are the same in both countries. Figure 1 examines the nonresponse bias for

different sets of differences between respondents and nonrespondents and different sets of nonresponse rates. More specifically, we show situations where the differences between respondents and nonrespondents lie between -0.3 and 0.3 .

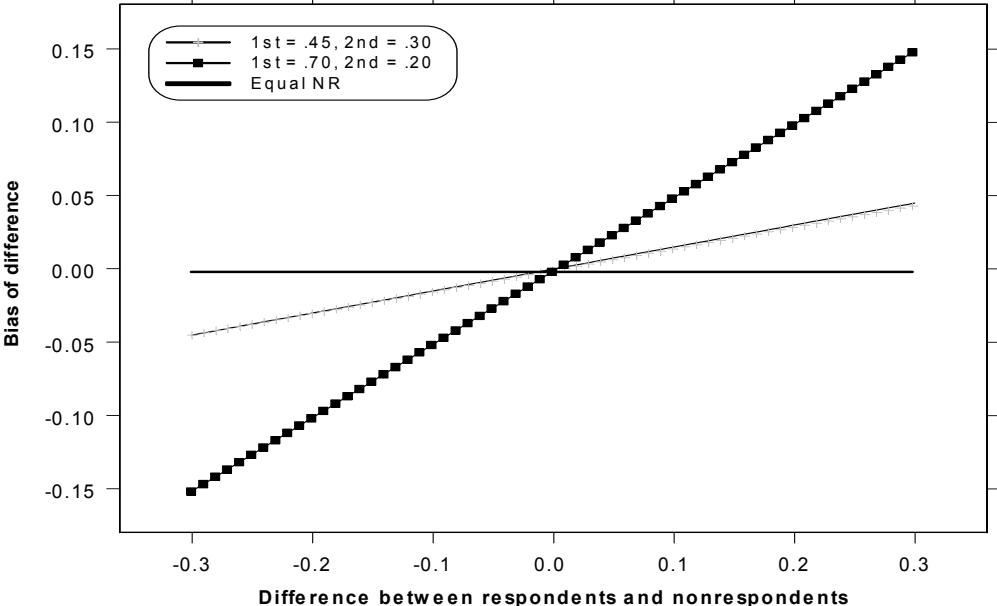


Figure 1 Nonresponse bias for a difference of country means, for the case of two respondent country means (0.4, 0.6) by various nonresponse rate combinations and by differences between respondent and nonrespondent means.

Figure 1 shows that when nonresponse rates are equal in both countries, there is no bias in the estimates of differences of the two country means. Larger biases can arise if there are large country differences in response rates. In the most extreme case, where a) the nonresponse rate in the first and second country equal respectively 70% and 20% and b) the difference between respondents and nonrespondents equals .3, the bias equals .15. In this case the difference in country respondent means ($\bar{y}_{1r} - \bar{y}_{2r} = .20$) departs rather strongly from the difference in sample means, namely ($\bar{y}_{1n} - \bar{y}_{2n} = .05$). Experiences in previous cross-national surveys indicate that such large differences in nonresponse rates are not unusual (Couper & De Leeuw, 2003). In the European Social Survey we will show how differences in nonresponse rates as high as 50% were observed.

In the hypothetical example above we have assumed that the differences between respondents and nonrespondents are equal in both countries. If this is not the case, the amount of nonresponse bias might be even bigger (see formula 2). Whether the differences between respondents and nonrespondents are equal across countries, is however hard to assess. Most of the time no information is available on the survey-estimates for the

nonrespondents. According to Couper and De Leeuw (2003), the **composition** of nonresponse may give an important indication of country differences in the nonresponse mechanism -i.e. the differences between respondents and nonrespondents. Nonresponse may occur for several reasons. The two most important reasons are refusal to participate and failure to contact the sample unit. These different types of nonresponse, e.g. refusals and noncontacts, may have a different impact on survey estimates. Consider for example the variable "meeting with friends and colleagues". It is generally acknowledged that social connectedness and engagement tend to stimulate survey cooperation (Groves and Couper, 1995). Hence, people who often meet with friends tend to be more cooperative and less likely to refuse a survey request. On the other hand, people who often meet friends might be harder to contact because they are more often out of the house. In other words: refusals and noncontacts will have a different impact on the distribution of survey estimates. Hence, if the nonresponse group in one society is made up entirely of noncontacts, while in another it is mostly refusals, the likelihood of nonresponse bias in the estimates of differences of country means may be greater than if the nonresponse mechanism is similar across countries. Differences in the composition of nonresponse might arise if some countries put the focus on minimising noncontact rates while others focus on reducing refusals (Couper & De Leeuw, 2003). A minimum of consistency and standardising of fieldwork practices is therefore recommended.

In addition to affecting bias, nonresponse also influences **precision of survey estimates**. Even in case no large differences between respondents and nonrespondents are observed or expected, nonresponse may threaten inference by reducing the number of available cases, thereby increasing sampling error of estimates. In some of the countries participating in the ESS, the initial sample size was increased to compensate for this. Obviously, this will increase survey-costs substantially in these countries. Moreover, high nonresponse will increase survey costs due to the fact that high levels of reluctance in a survey will force survey-practitioners to invest substantial amounts of their budget to the reduction of bias, e.g. through the use of refusal conversion techniques.

3. Dealing with nonresponse in the ESS

In the ESS, a central team consisting of survey methodologists from each country developed a set of high methodological standards that had to be followed by each country (Lynn, 2003). Characteristic for the ESS is that the standards set are those of the countries that normally achieve the highest quality rather than being a lowest common denominator. Examples of these standards or specifications in the field of nonresponse are:

- Data had to be collected face-to-face.
- Interviewers had to make at least 4 visits with at least one evening and weekend call before case could be abandoned as non-productive.
- For countries with no individual-named sampling frames, all visits preceding first contact had to be made face-to-face.
- Substitution isn't allowed.
- Personal briefing of all interviewers on the survey.
- A maximum assignment size of 24 issued sampling units to each interviewer.
- Close fieldwork monitoring including fortnightly reports on response.
- Fieldwork period should not be less than 30 days.

Within these standards or constraints, which can simply be thought of as entry criteria or minimal standards, challenging targets were set. With respect to nonresponse, countries were motivated to reach target response rates of 70%. Although it was clear from the beginning of the survey that the 70% response rate was impossible to reach for some countries (e.g. Switzerland) and would be a challenge for others (e.g. The Netherlands), the aim was to motivate countries to obtain results they would normally not achieve. To help countries reach this target rate they were encouraged or recommended to implement a set of Current Best Methods including:

- Select experienced interviewers whenever possible.
- Boosting interviewer confidence about their abilities.
- One day or half a day personal briefing sessions of all interviewers.
- Include a session on doorstep introductions and persuasion skills.
- Reissue all "soft" refusals and as many "hard" refusals as possible.

Setting standards and challenging targets will not guarantee that these standards and goals are met (Park & Jowell, 1997). It is therefore necessary to introduce a further stage of monitoring, evaluation and feedback. In fact, it is important that achievement of the standards is monitored in an objective way and that the results are reported. Ideally, the results of monitoring should feed back into the survey process, producing actions designed to result in the improvement of standards (Lynn, 2003). To accommodate monitoring and evaluation of fieldwork processes, the Central Coordinating team (CCT) of the ESS decided to carefully document nonresponse processes. Therefore, all "National Coordinators" were asked to fill in a "small-scale" survey concerning some important aspects of fieldwork:

- Length of fieldwork period.
- Selection, payment and briefing of interviewers.
- Number of required (evening and weekend) visits.
- Use of quality-back checks.
- Use of special refusal conversion strategies.
- Self-reported response rates.
- Information on using respondent incentives and brochures.
- Data cleaning and editing.

In fact, the ESS goes even further in this respect. Standardized information on nonresponse is not only available on the aggregate level, but on the level of individual sample units as well. In the ESS, each country had to use contact forms to record detailed fieldwork information. Developing such uniform contact forms in the context of a cross-national survey was a rather complex task. An inventory of contact forms used by several European survey organizations had to be made; several versions of contact forms to account for different sample frames and selection procedures were developed and a balance between field work burden associated with registering and keying in contact data and methodological data needs had to be found (Stoop et al., 2003, Devacht et al., 2003). In the end, these efforts resulted in a standardized contact form specification and the construction of a standard data file comprising information on:

- Day, date, month and hour of visit
- Nonresponse outcome of each visit
- Neighbourhood characteristics of each sample unit
- Reason of refusal, estimated age and gender for each refusal
- Information on selection procedure
- Mode of visit (telephone vs. face-to-face)
- Interviewer identification

Unfortunately not all countries delivered a complete call record dataset. The reasons for this varied; survey agencies not familiar with the collection of call record data found the burden too heavy, others couldn't deliver some of the information due to ruling confidentiality laws in their countries (Stoop et al., 2003, Devacht et al., 2003). In the end, comparable call record datasets were available for 16 countries: Belgium (BE), Luxembourg (LU), Germany (DE), Austria (AU), Great Britain (GB), Finland (FI), Slovenia (SI), Switzerland (CH), The Netherlands (NL), Spain (ES), Portugal (PT), Italy (IT), Israel (IL), Hungary (HU), Greece

(GR) and Poland (PL). Since the presence of such detailed nonresponse data is unique in the context of cross-national surveys, we will primarily focus on the analysis of these contact form data in the remainder of this paper. The next section will deal with the achieved nonresponse rates and after this we will study fieldwork efforts that potentially explain response rate differences between countries.

4. Nonresponse rates in the ESS

The call record data offer the advantage that the same nonresponse outcome definitions and nonresponse rate formulae can be used across countries, thereby enabling valid nonresponse comparisons. As we mentioned above, not all countries delivered a dataset containing the necessary information. For countries with no suitable call record data, we report (non-) response rates that were calculated by the national survey organisations and were reported in the National Technical Summary.

Before turning to the actual response rates we first discuss the definitions and formulae that we used to calculate nonresponse rates based on the call record data. A first issue pertains to the construction of an overall nonresponse disposition for each sample unit. Since the call record dataset didn't contain a variable that expressed the **final nonresponse disposition code** of each sample unit we had to merge or combine the separate outcomes for the different visits into one final code. Essentially there are two methods to do this: 1) the outcome of the last contact (with any member of the household) can be considered as the final nonresponse code (cfr. AAPOR, 2000) or a priority system of visit outcomes can be constructed to select the outcome with the highest priority (for an example see Lynn et al 2001). We eventually chose to use a combination of both methods; the outcome of the last contact was used as final response code, except when a refusal occurred at a visit and a later contact with the household resulted in an other eligible response reason. In this case, the final response code was "refusal to participate". With respect to the **definition of outcome codes** we used the "refusal" code to denote proxy, household or respondent refusals, broken appointments, respondent at home but didn't answer the door and interviews that were broken off. Noncontacts are defined as those addresses or households for which no contact with anyone was made at any visit. Respondents that moved within the country and were not re-approached were excluded from the noncontact category to enhance comparability between household and individual-named samples on the one side and address samples on the other side. The response-, refusal-, and noncontact rates are reported in table 1 and are all expressed as percentages of the total eligible sample size. Ineligibles comprise addresses or households that are not residential, not occupied, other ineligibility, respondent deceased and respondent moved abroad.

Table 1 Achieved response, refusal and noncontact rates.

Country		Response rate	Noncontact Rate	Refusal Rate	Eligible Sample size	Total Sample size
FI	%	73.3	1.4	20.9	2728	2766
GR	%	79.6	1.7	16.9	3222	3227
HU	%	70.3	3.2	15.1	2398	2484
IL	%	70.9	3.0	21.3	3523	3600
PL	%	72.2	0.8	19.6	2921	2978
SI	%	71.8	2.4	15.3	2114	2175
SE	%	69.0	4.0	21.0	2878	3000
PT	%	68.8	3.2	26.9	2196	2366
DK	%	68.4	4.6	23.0	2143	2150
NL	%	67.8	2.5	26.2	3486	3570
NO	%	65.0	3.0	25.0	3109	3215
IR	%	64.4	8.1	22.9	3179	3185
AU	%	60.6	10.1	27.0	3725	3828
BE	%	59.3	4.5	25.6	3204	3340
GB	%	55.0	3.5	30.6	3730	4013
DE	%	53.7	5.9	29.3	5436	5796
ES	%	53.6	7.9	35.3	3227	3657
IT	%	43.4	2.8	45.8	2778	3000
LU	%	43.2	6.9	37.0	3589	3773
CZ ¹	%	43.0	-	-	-	-
CH ²	%	33.0	2.0	55.1	4652	5086

Note 1: No detailed information is available for Czech republic

Note 2: For Switzerland, two approaches were followed, the first includes face-to-face recruitment and the second telephone recruitment. In this paper we only report on the telephone-part of the survey, since the contact form data for the face-to-face part was not suitable for analysis.

The figures in table 1 illustrate that about half of the participating countries obtained response rates close to or higher than the specified target rate of 70%. On the other hand, we do observe rather large differences with respect to nonresponse rates. Some countries; i.e. Slovenia, Poland, Hungary, Israël, Greece and Finland achieve response rates higher than 70% while others obtain response rates lower than 50% (Italy, Luxemburg, Czech Republic and Switzerland). These large nonresponse differences obviously raise questions with respect to the validity of cross-national comparisons. The decomposition of nonresponse seems rather similar across countries; for most countries refusal to participate is the most important reason of nonparticipation. The aim to keep noncontact rates to a strict minimum seems achieved in most countries. In general, noncontact rates are lower than 5%, exceptions are Ireland (8%), Czech Republic (12%), Germany (6.9), Spain (8%) and Austria (10.1%). In future rounds of the ESS, these countries might lower their nonresponse rate by further increasing contact rates.

There is one remarkable observation. The well-documented problem of nonresponse in the Netherlands isn't replicated here (see e.g. De Heer 1999; Hox & De Leeuw 2002; Stoop and Philippens 2004). In the ESS, the response rate achieved in the Netherlands is close to the specified target rate of 70%. In the next section we will demonstrate how this

result was achieved through the implementation of a resource-intensive refusal conversion strategy.

5. Towards an explanation of country-differences in response rates

There are many factors that may be responsible for the observed differences in response rates. We can distinguish between factors that can be influenced by the researcher and those that are fixed and cannot be manipulated. Amongst the latter we can distinguish between the survey-climate and the at-home patterns. The survey-climate refers to the survey practice and the general extent to which people consider survey research and survey interviews to be useful and legitimate (Groves & Couper, 1998). Survey-climate might strongly influence survey cooperation and refusal rates. At-home patterns refer to the patterns of time use that may influence the number of hours that persons spent at-home. These at-home patterns influence the contactability of households and will affect the efforts needed to bring down noncontact rates. Given the large demographic differences between countries (e.g. with respect to natality, women working outdoors, etc.) these at-home patterns are likely to differ rather strongly across countries (see e.g. De Heer & De Leeuw, 2002). Although survey-climate and at-home patterns are interesting and important from a theoretical point of view, they have little practical importance since they cannot be manipulated. More interesting are those factors that are, at least in principle, under control of the researcher. According to De Heer (1999, p.136-137) these can be divided into three groups:

- a) *General design factors:* e.g. mode of data collection, survey method (panel vs. cross-sectional) and observational unit (household vs. individual)
- b) *Fieldwork efforts:* the number of contact attempts, refusal conversion efforts, interviewer and respondent incentives and interviewer training
- c) *Survey organisation:* e.g. employment condition of interviewers and voluntary participation

As mentioned above, we will focus primarily on the study of fieldwork differences. In the remainder of this section we will first discuss the number of contact attempts and the timing of these attempts as possible explanations for differences in noncontact rates. Next, refusal conversion attempts are compared and evaluated.

5.1 Efforts to reduce noncontact rates

Contact procedures. In order to minimize fieldwork variation between countries, a common calling schedule was specified for all participating countries. Interviewers were instructed to make at least four personal visits to each sampling unit before abandoning it as non-productive, including at least one attempt in the evening, and at least one in the weekend. These attempts had to be spread over at least two different weeks. The first contact with potential respondents, following a possible advance letter had to be face-to-face. Once in contact with a household however, interviewers were permitted to make appointments by phone. The restriction on making initial contact by telephone was relaxed for all countries with suitable registers of individuals. Analysis of the call records, points out that Switzerland, Sweden, Finland and Norway predominantly used telephone attempts to recruit respondents. In the other countries, almost all visits were made “face-to-face”. Although all participating countries had to adopt this contacting procedure they were free to increase efforts. Irish, Slovenian and Greek interviewers for example were obliged to make at least 5 contact attempts, while Polish and Slovenian interviewers had to make at least two evening calls.

Number of contact attempts. It is generally assumed that increasing the number of contact attempts is the most important strategy to decrease noncontact rates. Figure 1 plots the average number of call attempts made to noncontacts against the percentage of noncontacts in the eligible sample. As we would expect, we observe a negative relationship between the achieved noncontact rate and the average number of contact attempts made to noncontacts (spearman rho = -0.42, p = 0.06). Figure 1 indicates that countries such as Germany, Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg and Austria who made on average *less* than the prescribed 4 contact attempts to noncontacts *didn't* achieve the target non-contact rate of 3%. A detailed analysis of call records reveals that in Ireland, Germany and Belgium most of the interviewers complied with the “minimum of four contact attempts” rule. What seems to be the case here is that a small core of interviewers is responsible for the majority of noncontacts that didn't receive the prescribed minimum of four contact attempts. In Ireland and Germany 5% of the interviewers is responsible for approximately 50% of all noncontacts that didn't receive four contact attempts. In Belgium, 5% of the interviewers is responsible for 67% of noncontacts receiving less than four contact attempts. In these countries, the contact rate can probably be raised by close monitoring of interviewers. This may help to identify problematic interviewers, to stimulate them to increase their efforts or to reissue cases from these interviewers to more reliable interviewers. In Luxembourg on the other hand, the vast majority of interviewers broke the “minimum of four attempts” rule at least once. This may

point to a more *structural* problem, for example that interviewers are not fully aware of the fact that the prescribed guidelines are mandatory.

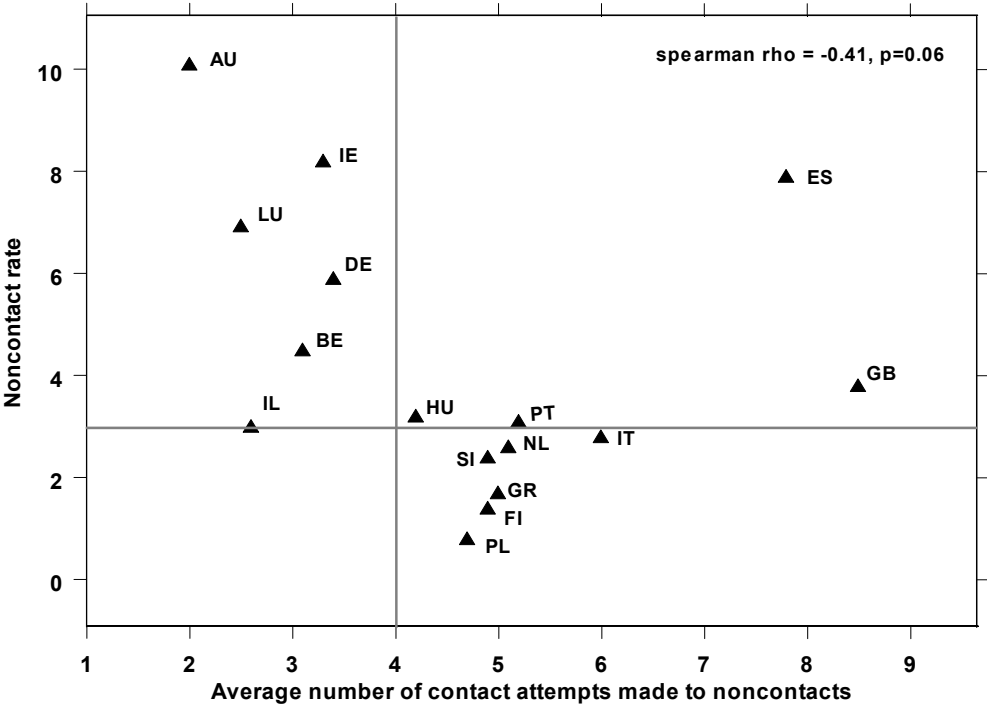


Figure 2: Scatterplot of average number of contact attempts versus achieved noncontact rate

Countries that complied with the “minimum of 4 call attempts” rule generally reached the target noncontact rate of 3% or at least came close. The relationship between the average number of contact attempts and the achieved noncontact rates is however not clear-cut. In Great Britain and Spain e.g more contact attempts were made than were strictly required but still the target rate wasn’t achieved. In Israel on the other hand, only 2.8 contact attempts were made before cases were abandoned as noncontacts and a noncontact rate of 3% was achieved. In the next two sections, we will discuss differences with respect to the timing of calls and contactability of households. These differences might play an intermediate role in the relationship between the number of call attempts and the achieved noncontact rate. For example, countries with populations that are hard to reach will have to make more contact attempts to attain the same contact rate. Similarly, countries where interviewers make more evening calls will need less contact attempts to achieve the same noncontact rates (see e.g. Purdon, Campanelli and Sturgis, 1998).

Contactability. Following Groves and Couper (1998, p.80) we define “contactability” as the propensity for a household to be contacted by an interviewer at any given moment in time.

Due the fact that the time spent at home may diverge across countries, we expect that some populations will be harder to contact than others. To assess this, the probability to contact a household at the first call attempt at different times of day and week was examined. Figure 3 shows that the probability to contact a household at a weekday morning or afternoon is relatively low in Spain, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Portugal and high in Israel, Poland and Italy. These figures indicate that in some countries interviewers will have to make more contact attempts to reach sample units than in other countries. Hence, these figures might partially explain why Israelian interviewers on average only made 2.8 contact attempts and reached the target noncontact rate, while British interviewers on average had to make close to 9 attempts to reach a similar noncontact rate.

Figure 3 also illustrates that, in line with previous research, evening and weekend contact attempts are in general more productive than weekday afternoon or morning attempts. In all countries, except for Italy and Poland, we found a significant relationship ($p < .05$) between the probability of contact at first contact attempt and the timing of this attempt. In Great Britain, Ireland, Belgium, Portugal and Switzerland evening attempts are clearly more productive than afternoon and morning attempts. In Poland and Israel on the other hand hardly any relationship can be observed between the timing of contact attempts and the probability of making successful contact. It seems that in general the (relative) benefits of evening and weekend calls are highest in countries where households are rather hard to reach on a weekday afternoon/morning. This suggests that survey organisations in these countries can compensate less favourable at-home patterns by adapting calling strategies towards making more contact attempts in the evening and the morning. In the next section we will examine patterns of the timing of contact attempts.

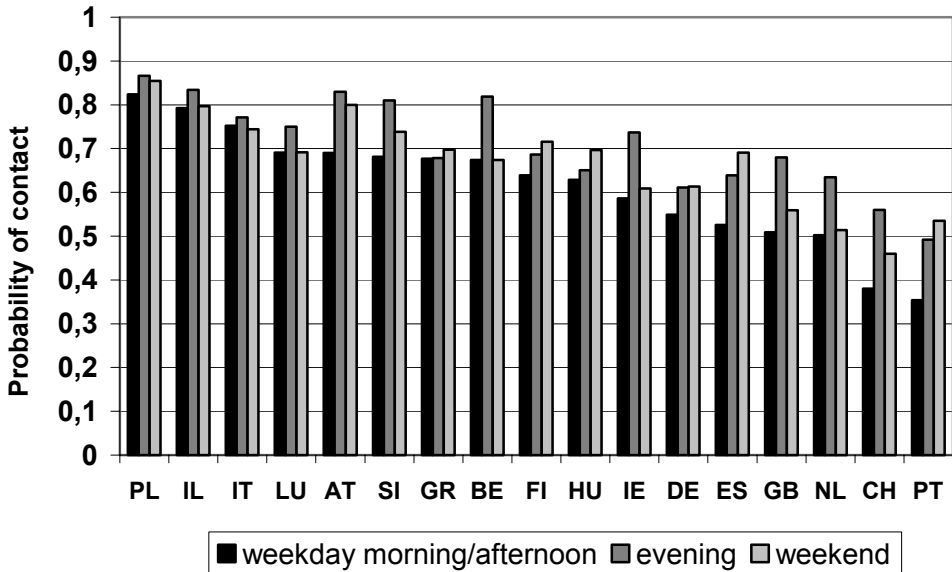


Figure 3 Probability of contact at first call attempt by timing of first call attempt

The timing of contact attempts. Figure 4 shows the percentage of contact attempts that were made on a *weekday morning or afternoon* for the first three contact attempts. The percentages in this figure are conditional upon the previous attempt being a noncontact, so that the percentages at each attempt or visit are based on those households where no contact was made at previous contact attempts. Figure 4 shows how interviewers in Ireland, Great Britain and Spain seem to avoid evening and weekend visits at the first two contact attempts. In these countries, respectively 75%, 83.7% and 71% of all first contact attempts were made on a weekday afternoon or morning. In the previous section it was shown how the benefits of making evening and weekend visits were rather high in these countries. This implies that Irish, British and Spanish interviewers might improve the efficiency of their contact attempts by making more evening and weekend attempts.

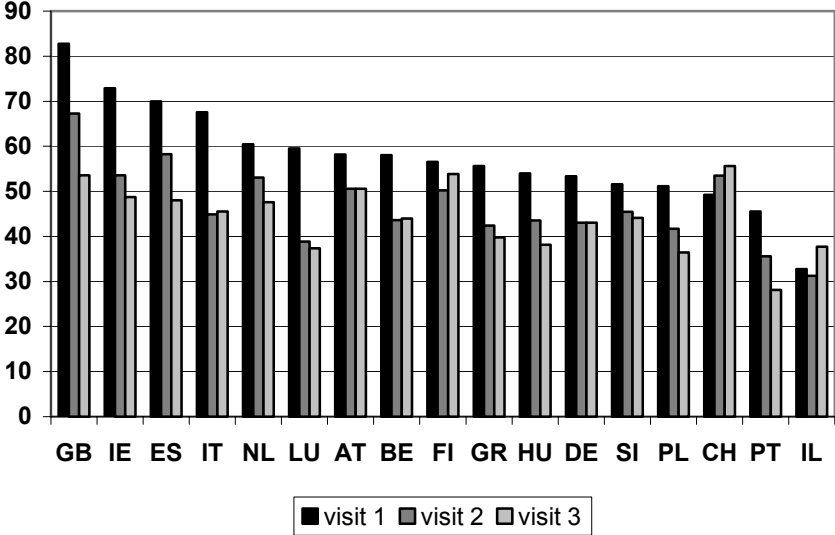


Figure 4 Percentage of contact attempts made on a weekday afternoon/morning for the first three call attempts

The lowest percentage of afternoon and morning attempts was found in Israel (38%) and Portugal (45.5%). Previously we saw how Portuguese households were rather hard to reach at the afternoon or in the morning. It seems that the Portuguese interviewers/survey organisation have successfully tried to compensate this by making more evening and weekend attempts.

5.2 Refusal Conversion Efforts

Survey researchers use many techniques to increase survey participation. One of these techniques is the implementation of a *refusal conversion program*. Refusal conversion means re-approaching initially reluctant respondents to persuade them to reconsider participating in the survey. Much of the success of refusal conversion procedures is

attributable to the “softness” of the initial refusal. Refusals often occur due to temporal circumstances such as bad timing or mood swings, indicating that the group of consistent die-hard refusals probably constitutes only a small part of the total group of refusals. The focus of this section is to study refusal conversion procedures in the ESS. This will be done by examining differences in the practice and implementation of refusal conversion procedures and assessing the effects of refusal conversion on response rates

Refusal conversion guidelines. The ESS recommended countries to reissue all “soft” refusals and as many “hard” refusals as possible, to a senior interviewer, in order to increase participation. Given that the specifications of the refusal conversion procedure were rather general (e.g. what is the definition of a soft refusal) we can expect that the refusal conversion practice will diverge to a considerable extent in different countries. In addition, the differences between countries in initial response rate (before refusal conversion) can be responsible for differences in refusal conversions efforts. In fact, there is less need to implement refusal conversion in countries in which the minimum target response rate (70%) was realised without some refusal conversion practices. One must also realise that reissuing a refusal to another interviewer on the basis of process information collected by the previous interviewer requires a lot of efforts. Whatever refusal conversion practice is implemented, each procedure creates some practical organisational problems. One can wonder whether the survey organisations have enough means and capacity to organise an effective refusal conversion practice (Loosveldt et al., 2003).

Refusal conversion efforts. Figure 4 shows the decomposition of the percentage of eligible sample units that explicitly refused to participate at least once into a) refusals that were not re-approached; b) refusals that were re-approached but not converted and c) converted refusals. In line with our expectations we observe that refusal conversion efforts vary strongly across countries. In the Netherlands, Great Britain and Switzerland respectively 88%, 84% and 77% of all refusals were re-approached. High conversion efforts were also made in Italy, Greece and Finland with respectively 44%, 54% and 50% of all refusals being re-approached. The majority of countries including Spain, Slovenia, Poland, Belgium, Austria and Israel made moderate efforts with 20% to 34% of all refusals being re-approached. Ireland, Hungary and Luxembourg hardly invested refusal conversion efforts. For Germany and Portugal we can make no exact statements due to the fact that some attempts were not keyed in the contact form dataset.

Effectiveness of refusal conversion strategies. The conversion success rate was highest in Austria followed by The Netherlands, Belgium and Slovenia. In these countries respectively 47%, 39%, 33% and 32% of all re-approached refusals were successfully “converted”. For Greece, Finland, Poland and Israel, conversion success rates lie between 20% and 30%. In Great Britain and Spain conversion rates are close to 15% while the lowest conversion success rates were achieved by Switzerland and Italy with success rates lying around 5%.

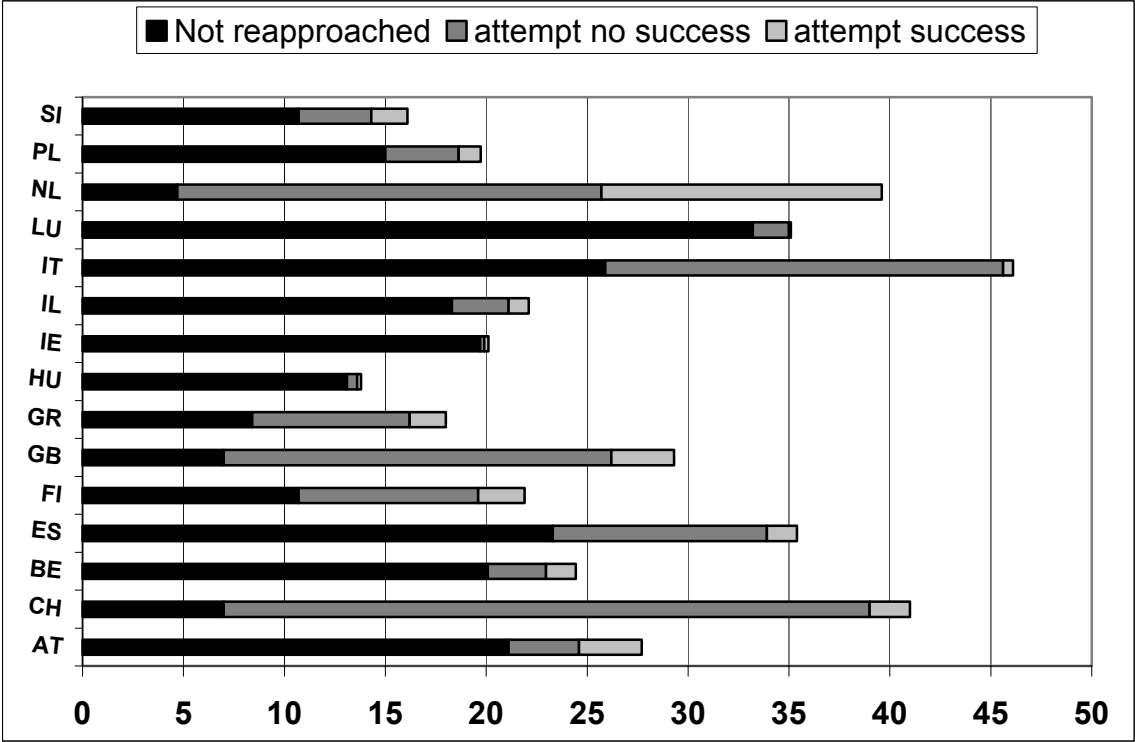


Figure 5 Decomposition of percentage of eligible sample units that refused at least once into 1) refusals that were not re-approached, 2) refusals that were re-approached but not converted and 3) refusals that were successfully converted

These conversion success rates can however not be compared across countries in a straightforward manner. Some countries have focused efforts on a relatively small and perhaps “soft” group of refusals (e.g. Belgium) while others have reissued almost all refusals (e.g. the Netherlands). Without any doubt, high conversion rates will be harder to obtain in the latter case. In this respect the result in the Netherlands is quite remarkable. When we compare conversion success rates among countries that reissued the majority of refusals, i.e.-Switzerland, The Netherlands and Great Britain, we observe that the success rate of the Netherlands (40%) is much higher than that of Great Britain and Switzerland. Inspection of the National Technical Summary reveals that the Dutch survey organisation implemented a range of special refusal conversion strategies. For example, half way through the interview period, a letter was sent to previously refusing respondents in which they were again asked to

participate. Reluctant sample units were also encouraged with financial donations up to 5 euro, supplemented with a quiz with monetary prizes to win. It is not unreasonable to assume that the combination of these factors have contributed to the success of refusal conversion procedures in the Netherlands.

Effects on response rates. In general, the effects of refusal conversion strategies on response rates are rather marginal. For most countries the effects vary between 1 and 3 percent points. For countries such as Switzerland and Great Britain who invested quite some efforts, the returns are somewhat disappointing. An example of a country where the implementation of refusal conversion procedures did make a difference is the Netherlands. Through their intensive and effective refusal conversion strategy the Dutch survey organisation managed to increase response rates by 13.88 percentage points (from 53% to 68%). The results in the Netherlands demonstrate that, although quite some efforts have to be invested, acceptable response rates can be obtained in countries with less favourable survey-climates.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented the main results of the first analysis of nonresponse data in the European Social Survey. In this last section we will summarize some of the most important conclusions and implications of the results.

The results show that what is considered to be an “optimal” fieldwork strategy in one country might not necessarily be so in other countries. Consider for example the timing of contact attempts. In some countries (e.g. Portugal, Great Britain, Spain, Ireland) evening visits are clearly more productive (to gain contact) than weekday afternoon or morning attempts. For these countries one may give the advice to maximize efficiency of contact attempts by increasing the proportion of evening and weekend visits. For other countries, timing does *not or hardly* influences the probability of contacting households. In these countries the benefits of evening visits might not outweigh the disadvantages. Restricting contact attempts to evenings might e.g. reduce the length of the working day, may result interviewers to increase travel costs and may increase the number of hours spent on the survey. In addition, calling strategies also have to be sensitive to the wishes and concerns of the interviewer (Purdon, Campanelli and Sturgis, 1998). In these countries the advice might therefore be to make *less* instead of *more* evening and weekend contact attempts. In any case, the results suggest that it is a good practice to tailor survey practices to specific national or cultural needs.

As mentioned earlier, the results of monitoring should ideally feed back into the survey process and should lead to actions that *improve* fieldwork procedures. The first results of the nonresponse analysis already yield some interesting starting points for improving survey practice. Consider for example the use of refusal conversion procedures. It seems that the implementation of these procedures was especially successful in the Netherlands where response rates could be raised from 53% to 68%. A logical next step would be to find out *why* and especially *how* the Dutch survey organisation has achieved this success. This information can subsequently be used by other countries to improve their refusal conversion strategies. In other words, countries participating in the ESS and especially those with only moderate or low response rates can learn from the “success stories” of other countries.

Finally we want to stress that most of the analyses presented in this paper are intended to raise questions rather than providing definite answers. Analysing contact form data is one thing; using these data to actually improve fieldwork strategies in a cross-national survey is quite another thing. In order for these data to be used in an effective manner, the results and their implications should thoroughly be discussed with national coordinators from each of the participating countries. These national coordinators can add useful information on the specificities of each country ensuring that the right conclusions are drawn from these data.

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