

INTERVIEW THE EXPERT

Conducting the General Social Survey (GSS) during a Pandemic—Interview with René Bautista

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Survey Practice

Panel data from the 2020 General Social Survey (GSS), one of most valuable social science resources in the country, were recently made available to the public. The GSS team at NORC was able to meet the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic—e.g., to protect the health and safety of both the interviewers and survey participants—by adapting their data collection methods away from in-person interviews to web-based and telephone surveys. Persevering by adapting innovative methodological techniques, in 2020, NORC conducted the GSS as two studies— a panel study (reinterviewing GSS participants from 2016 and 2018) and a cross-sectional study (with a newly selected representative sample from 2020). The second survey (cross-sectional study) will be available later this year. In this edition of “Ask the Expert,” *Survey Practice* Editor, Emily Geisen, talks with René Bautista at NORC to learn more about the methodological changes made to the GSS during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you René for agreeing to talk with us about the General Social Survey (GSS). Most readers are probably somewhat familiar with the GSS, but can you please give us a bit of background about the General Social Survey (GSS)?

Thank you for the opportunity, Emily. The GSS is a biennial, nationally representative survey conducted by my organization, NORC at the University of Chicago, since 1972 to monitor societal change and study the growing complexity of American society. It is the longest-running national longitudinal survey tracking the views of the American people and where they stand on a vast array of critical issues. GSS questions cover a broad spectrum of topics, such as race relations, crime, religious identity, generosity, confidence in institutions, workplace conflict, and many more. The GSS is funded in large part by the National Science Foundation.

And can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what your role is on the GSS?

I’m a principal scientist in the methodology and quantitative social science department at NORC. I’ve been affiliated with NORC for more than a decade, where I previously served as senior methodologist. I also teach courses on data collection and survey questionnaire design at the Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago. My PhD background is in survey research and methodology—I earned my degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I joined the GSS team in 2017, and currently, I serve as co-principal investigator and director of the General Social

Survey (GSS). In my role, I make sure the GSS follows best practices in the survey research field. I coordinate various teams that support the GSS, provide assistance to the user community, and coordinate dissemination activities.

I understand that the GSS is traditionally an in-person survey. Can you summarize how the survey was typically conducted in the years before the pandemic?

The GSS measures societal change over time by including the same set of survey questions—usually referred to as core items—and some additional thematic modules that may vary from year to year. On average, the GSS has collected between 2,000 and 2,500 interviews in each cross-sectional study for a total of almost 65,000 interviews from 1972 to 2018. Historically, the GSS has been conducted as a cross-sectional face-to-face survey, with telephone as a supplementary mode. The GSS generates a representative sample of noninstitutionalized adults living in the United States. While the GSS has been historically a cross-sectional study, in 2006, the GSS adopted a panel methodology, reinterviewing the same set of select respondents, but the panel approach was ended in 2014 due to limited funding and continued as a cross-sectional study.

I am guessing that you could not continue using that same approach in 2020. How did you and your team adapt to the pandemic?

In 2020, for the health and safety of our interviewers and survey participants, we did not field the GSS as a traditional face-to-face survey. However, at such an important time in our history, having no data would certainly have been a disservice to the social science community and the American public. Instead of the traditional study, we conducted the GSS as two studies: a panel survey (reinterviewing former GSS respondents from 2016 and 2018) with a reduced questionnaire (core content), and a cross-sectional survey with newly selected cases in 2020 based on address-based sampling (ABS) methodology with the traditional GSS questionnaire (core content and thematic modules). We also needed to change the primary mode of data collection for both studies; namely, we adapted the questionnaire to be administered as a web survey and offered the option of taking the survey over the telephone as well.

Switching to web and phone makes sense when you cannot interview in person. Tell us why you added a panel study for 2020. What did it add compared with your traditional cross-sectional study?

It is important to remember that there was much uncertainty around the expected trajectory of the COVID-19 health crisis at the time the GSS was about to be fielded in 2020. We were closely monitoring the gravity of the public health situation; however, the information we were learning about the impending crisis was new and shifting every day. The face-to-face study was scheduled for launch in April 2020, but on March 13, the U.S. authorities declared the pandemic a national emergency and issued social distancing

guidelines through April 15 that were further extended to April 30. The GSS team quickly started discussions with our stakeholders to assess different data collection options, ranging from not collecting data in 2020 to recontacting previous GSS participants. We acted swiftly and conducted a pilot test on the feasibility of recontacting GSS panel respondents and found encouraging results—people were open and willing to answer our survey over the web or phone. As a result, we worked to implement a panel study, which gave us an extraordinary opportunity: measure changes at the individual level in 2020 having as reference the year of 2016 or 2018. In the assessment of methodological options, we also recognized the possible limitations of a panel study—such as attrition—thus, we considered it also important to generate an additional fresh sample of cases selected in 2020 for a cross-sectional study, which we did. In May of this year, we released the panel data to the public, and we expect to release cross-sectional data later this year.

You had to pivot quickly in 2020. Did you bring new methodologies to the table or did you rely on ones you had used in the past?

For the panel study, we implemented an innovative way to prioritize cases in data collection to ensure representation of the target population—that is, by using R-indicators. The goal was to achieve an adequate representativity of the original sample drawn in 2016 or 2018. The GSS team worked to identify information based on survey and frame data that would allow us to model and predict probabilities of participation among several groups. In other words, based on what we knew about panel respondents from 2016 or 2018, we assessed what subgroups of respondents could be under- or overrepresented in our 2020 data and that the information allowed us to more strategically contact subgroups of nonrespondents during the data collection period while staying within project goals. We also conducted experiments based on different incentives to identify what interventions could be more effective to increase completion rates.

In addition, the GSS collaborated for the first time with the American National Election Studies (ANES). More concretely, GSS panelists who reported being U.S. citizens were invited to participate in a follow-up survey conducted by ANES to gather opinions related to their experiences on elections and campaigns. GSS and ANES will make their respective datasets available to the public, and a linking key to merge both datasets will be announced later in 2021.

Given the methodological changes this year, is there anything that potential data users need to know about the 2020 data before they use it?

It is important to remember that when talking about the GSS 2020, we're talking about two studies (panel and cross-sectional study), and each study has its own strengths. Also, both studies were implemented mainly on web instruments, so it will be important to keep in mind potential mode effects as well as sampling procedure when comparing with results from previous years.

If readers want to take a deeper dive, we have [prepared documentation](#) about the scope and possibilities provided in the recent GSS data. We encourage users to take a closer look at the data and documentation for the 2016–2020 GSS panel (data released in May) and the GSS in 2020 (data expected to be released later in the year) to see how the data are different from previous iterations of the GSS.

One last point I want to emphasize is that the panel data are not a part of the data that are traditionally included in the [GSS data explorer](#).

The GSS typically releases data during the spring once the data collection has ended. You mentioned that the cross-sectional 2020 data will be released later this year. How have the release procedures and the overall schedule had to change for the 2020 data?

Yes, the release procedures for the data will be different than in years past. We planned on releasing the data in phases to make data available to researchers as soon as possible. In 2021, there will be three significant releases. The release of the panel data took place recently (in May) and was the first of the three. The second data release date will fall later in the year related to the historic collaboration with the American National Election Studies (ANES) to administer a 2020 ANES questionnaire to the 2020 GSS panelists. As mentioned previously, later this year ANES and GSS will provide the crosswalk information, so that researchers will be able to link the datasets and study changes in society before and after the 2020 election—e.g., by connecting reported social views with political preferences and views. In addition, social scientists will be able to study COVID-19 concerns, such as loneliness, interactions of police with communities and ethnic groups, and voter intention connected with the foundational content from the GSS. Once we release the crosswalk file to link the GSS and ANES studies, researchers will have a virtual gold mine of data to examine.

The third and final release of cross-sectional data will likely take place in the last quarter of the year, and given the content of the survey (that is, GSS core content and thematic modules), it is the one most in line with a traditional release of GSS data.

It's also worth noting that 2022 is the 50th anniversary of the GSS, and we will have some very interesting activities planned throughout next year.

In retrospect, is there anything you would have done differently to field the GSS during the pandemic?

We have reflected on the formidable challenges that 2020 represented, and I don't think we would have done anything differently. The GSS data collection team was able to quickly pivot and adapt to the circumstances. I'm very fortunate to collaborate with a team committed to high-quality data, including our scientific advisory board, program officers at the National Science Foundation, academic principal investigators, and NORC's research and operations teams. We will continue to analyze the data to understand how methodological changes may have an impact on the traditional GSS trends. We'll continue to conduct experiments to assess the impact of web versus face-to-face in the core content, but the experience in 2020 has provided a good foundation to conduct more research on changes. Comparing different modes will continue to be an active area of research for the GSS.

If readers have more questions about the GSS, how can they get in touch with you?

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