



Details of the Evaluation Process for the 2006 Pilot Study

September 29, 2006

Earlier this year, we announced a new way for people to propose questions for American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys: the ANES Online Commons. We opened the Online Commons on March 15, 2006 and closed it on June 22, 2006. Our main goal in implementing the Online Commons (OC) was to use the development of ANES surveys as opportunities to provide greater value to a range of scholars, students, and interested members of the public.

The chief means of achieving this goal was through the broad solicitation of proposals. When we first opened the OC, we were uncertain about the kind of response we would get. As you may know, the response was tremendous. Over 300 scholars became OC members. From these members, we received nearly 100 proposals and ideas for over 1100 questions. The OC participants were very diverse, including scholars from a wide range of disciplines and many graduate students. Over one-third of our proposals were from disciplines outside of political science – a remarkable demonstration of the actual and potential reach of the ANES. We are deeply grateful to all who participated. Collectively, OC participants brought a new energy and much creativity to the study of elections. We believe that the ANES is stronger when its surveys are the product of many ideas. Thanks to you, it is very strong.

A secondary means of achieving the goal was to provide feedback to every person who made a proposal. OC proposers could receive feedback from other OC members as well as personalized responses from us. We think that such communications are vitally important. To people whose idea can help improve the ANES right now, the feedback provides ways to improve current survey content. Others have great ideas that need further development before we can implement them on an ANES survey. Feedback helps build virtual networks of people who can help each other design effective questions. Moreover, we also want these communicative moments to be of value to the proposers. We know that sending proposals to ANES is no easy task. Even when we cannot use an idea on one of our surveys, we want to be able to use the broad expertise that is available to ANES to give these scholars constructive advice. If ANES can help these generous individuals improve the effectiveness of their research designs, that helps scientific progress in ways that we are happy to do.

Unfortunately, we are under a hard constraint regarding how many questions we can include on the 2006 Pilot Study. Our estimate is that we have room for only 120 questions. Therefore, we had to make some very difficult decisions about what to include and not to include.

Our evaluation had three steps. First, after the OC closed, we assigned every proposal to a subcommittee of the Board of Overseers. The subcommittees then prepared reports that they shared with the rest of the Board and the PIs. Second, the Board and the PIs met at Stanford

University in late July. There we discussed how to develop a Pilot Study that would be of maximum value to the growing ANES user community. Third, the PIs took all of the information and then worked to craft the set of proposals that best fit the Pilot Study criteria. They began contacting the authors of these proposals in late August and formally announced the list of winning proposals at a special panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Philadelphia on September 2, 2006. A complete list of winning proposals is here: http://www.electionstudies.org/announce/newsltr/ANES_OCwinners_20060929.pdf

The PIs then prepared individualized responses to authors of proposals that they could not act on at present and distributed those in late September.

We take a moment to provide general feedback about main differences between proposals that were successful and those that were not. In offering this feedback, we want to differentiate criteria that were specific to the Pilot Study.

For the Pilot Study, the stated objective is to test new questions in order to evaluate their potential suitability for future ANES data collections. Therefore, the entire study must be devoted to *the evaluation of new questions*. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Pilot Study will not be part of the time series. The sampling framework (re-interviewing 2004 respondents without refreshment) – and NSF guidelines – do not permit such an association.

With the goal of evaluating new questions in mind, there was a set of proposals on which we could not act now, which can be successful in the future.

- For example, some proposals we received asked us to be sure to run certain questions from past ANES surveys in 2006. Given the mandate of the Pilot Study, we could not accommodate these requests.
- Others asked us to run questions which have already appeared on other major surveys. Since our mandate is to evaluate new questions – principally questions that had never before appeared on surveys – we did not act on these requests.
- Finally, some proposals described new questions that lacked an apparent connection to determinants of turnout and vote choice.

Otherwise, our evaluation centered around the following set of criteria:

1) **Novelty of Idea**: Are the ideas in the proposal new, either for the study of elections or for another social science enterprise or both? If so, are they directly relevant to the mission of the ANES (i.e., understanding the causes or consequences of voter turnout or candidate choice)? Most of the proposals we received satisfied this criterion.

2) **Building on Solid Theoretical Footing**: Do the ideas in this proposal follow from strong, convincing theory about how people are likely to think and/or act? Given ANES's mandate to serve a broad user community, it is important that users be able to understand, and explain to others, the theoretical rationale for including particular concepts and questions on an ANES survey. Concepts should be defended as part of a set of cause-and-effect relationships that ultimately have the potential (alone or with other factors) to have a significant impact on vote choice or turnout. Given the temporal element of the ANES Time Series (and our new panel

study), time is one of the “other factors” that is useful to name. Regarding the questions that represent the concepts, it is important to think about the quality of the data that questions will provide. Quality, in turn, is a function of wording. If we ask a question that a nationally representative set of respondents understand in the same way, then the data has greater value in analyses that depend on comparing responses. Many questions, however, either refuse respondents or are asked in ways that should undermine an analyst’s confidence in the comparability of responses. Much of the feedback that we offered to OC proposers was in the spirit of working with them to arrive at more effective theoretical arguments about the relevance and role of particular concepts and questions.

3) **Building on a Solid Empirical Foundation**: Have the ideas advocated in the proposal been empirically tested and supported by past research? For some proposals, it was helpful for us to see that focal concepts had been evaluated in a laboratory setting or on other surveys that were credible, but not directly comparable to the ANES. This kind of evidence was particularly valuable

4) **Breadth of Relevance and Generalizability**: Will the ideas being advocated be interesting, and/or provocative, and/or counter-intuitive to many scholars? Most of the proposals we received satisfied this criteria. There were some cases where some very good ideas were proposed – but ultimately they were ideas that would serve a very narrow range of research hypotheses. While we’re excited to see such research unfold, it is difficult to justify placing such items on the ANES when the opportunity cost is excluding questions that are just as interesting, but would have far broader value to users.

5) **Suitability to ANES**. What kinds of statistical analyses would be required to make the most of the proposed questions, and can these analyses be conducted with the array of measures that will be available to analysts of the pilot study data? This criterion is critically important as most ANES users draw inferences from the data using statistics. This criterion played a focal role in our decisions not to act on some very good ideas that would likely produce some very unusable data. For example, a few proposals featured questions for which it was unlikely that more than a handful of respondents would say “yes.” While such frequencies can be valuable to know, they severely limit the usefulness of such variables to most ANES users. Of course, for people with temporal hypotheses, having no one say “yes” at a certain time can be quite informative – and we are willing to consider proposals where such outcomes are possible. But we would encounter problems if such null results were expected most or every time the question would be run.

6) **Bridge-Building**: Can the ideas proposed build intellectual bridges from one or more research traditions to others? There is no single approach to explaining turnout or vote choice. Where possible, however, we would like to challenge researchers within certain paradigms to explore the consequences of interacting with other scientific communities. We received several proposals that brought ideas from outside traditional ways of looking at elections into the context in exciting and potentially path-breaking ways. Subject to such proposals meeting the other state criteria, we’d like to see more of this.

7) **Controversy-Relevant**: Are the ideas proposed relevant to ongoing controversies among researchers, such that our adding particular questions can advance the debate?

We hope that OC proposers have found the individualized feedback provided to them constructive and productive. We also hope that the general feedback offered here is helpful to others.

With all of you, we would like to continue a conversation about how to integrate innovative new ideas into the electoral context in a way that can inform a broad range of hypotheses. To this end, we want to make you aware of upcoming opportunities to help us develop two major ANES studies.

Next month, we will open the Online Commons to solicit proposals for our new Panel Study. This study will interview a set of respondents once a month for 21 months (from September of 2007 through May of 2009). This design will allow us to measure how respondents are thinking about electoral issues before the primary begins, through the election season, and then into the formative months of the 44th president's term. The questionnaire for this study is wide-open and we are looking for creative ideas that both serve the ANES mission while making the most of this dynamic data collection strategy. Early in 2007, we will also open the Online Commons to solicit proposals for the 2008 version of the ANES Time-Series Study – a data collection that now spans 50 years.

We will be posting more details about these opportunities in the coming weeks and months. If you would like to be the first to hear about them, please join our mailing list (www.electionstudies.org/joinmail.htm) or check our website (www.electionstudies.org) regularly. Either way, stay tuned!

On behalf of the Board of Overseers and the growing user community, we thank you for your participation in the development of the ANES. We are so grateful for the tremendous response to the Online Commons and the many wonderful, creative, and important discoveries that you harvest from ANES data. Your energy and effectiveness are a constant inspiration to us and we consider ourselves fortunate to work with you in advancing the scientific study of elections.

Sincerely,

Jon A. Krosnick and Arthur Lupia
ANES Principal Investigators

ANES is funded by the:

