NORC at the University of Chicago

AmeriSpeak

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FINAL REPORT

“Why Is Your Response Rate Lower Than Those of Other Probability Panels?”

Spoiler Alert: It’s not lower. In fact, it’s substantially higher!

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The term “response rate,” is both an “official statistic” and a more amorphous term denoting the degree to which people respond to a survey. There is no “good” reason for the second of these definitions to exist. It breeds confusion and allows some research providers to obscure the actual quality of their research as measured by overall response.

For AmeriSpeak, the misuse of “response rate” is particularly disappointing because of the extraordinary efforts we make to properly calculate and increase our response rate. AmeriSpeak is dedicated to rigor and transparency and is the only commercially available probability panel in the U.S. that uses not one, but two expensive, but extremely effective, methods of recruiting households to our panel:

- Highly incentivized Federal Express mailing invitations
- Door-to-door visits to households to explain the value of joining AmeriSpeak

Because buyers of survey services might not be fully knowledgeable about the particulars of properly reporting a response rate, there is a substantial risk of improperly presenting the stage with the highest “response rate” as the final reported response rate. The most typical misuse of “response rate” is to report a measured level of response from one stage of recruiting survey participants, acting as if it were the ONLY stage of recruiting survey participants.

There are three common stages of response in probability panels. Only together do they accurately comprise a “response rate.”

Recruiting stage: Panels always have multiple stages of response. First, panels recruit people into their panel. This is often the stage with the lowest participation rate. (Please, let’s not call any individual stage a “response” rate. “Response rate” is and should only be used as the “net total” rate of all stages.) Nearly all panels find that, at best, only about five to 10 percent of invited households join a panel when this first stage uses the “typical” method of mailing an invitation letter and perhaps a reminder letter or two.

Profiling stage: Most panels have a second stage of response, the profiling stage during which someone who joins the panel is given an initial test of their true willingness to be a panel member. They are immediately sent at least one “profile survey” so the panel company understands them better, from whether they are a democrat or republican, to being disabled, or a veteran, and any number of additional metrics. If a “joined” panelist can’t even respond to their first survey, typically, they are not counted as a panelist and are dropped from the panel.

Survey stage: Third, panelists will get invited to a specific survey and will or will not respond to that. This is the “response rate” panels will often report, even though it is technically only the **survey cooperation rate**. Because survey invitations are sent only to panelists who persisted through the

recruiting and profiling stages, the cooperation rate for each invited survey is typically between 20 and 70 percent, depending on study-specific factors.

Unreported panel attrition can deceptively improve reported response rates.

There is one last critically important facet of panels we must mention: Panel Attrition. One arguably deceptive way that panels will stack the response rate deck is to ignore panel attrition entirely–to the point where they don't even note attrition as a source of nonresponse. It typically goes like this: say a panel company invites 100,000 households to join their panel. 10 percent, or 10,000, join. A few years go by, and while they do not technically quit, 70% of the panelists stop taking surveys. (In short, they have quit. They just didn't tell the panel company.) So, the panel company stops inviting them. They invite only the 3,000 "active" panelists to the surveys and treat the 7,000 attrited panelists as if they never existed. But they most certainly did exist. Doesn't good science rationally and logically dictate that they should be counted? And, methodologists agree: See, for example, Callegaro and DiSogra, 2008.[1]

So, let's compare the two most common methods of reporting response rates with AmeriSpeak's method based on transparency in research:

Common Method 1: Report only the survey completion rate as the actual response rate

Recruitment rate = 10%, Profiling rate = 60%, Retention rate = 30%, Survey Completion Rate = 60%

Reported Response Rate = 60%

Notably, under no circumstances is this a response rate. It is a cooperation rate. Survey organizations need to be as clear as possible with their clients about the difference.

[1] Peer-reviewed research indicates that error from panel attrition bias can be substantial. Callegaro and DiSogra (2008) include the retention rate in calculating responses rates in recognition that "attrition has an effect on cumulative response rates and, even more importantly, on the overall representativeness of panel demographics" (2009, p. 1024). An extensive body of research documents that panel attrition bias also extends to psychographical, attitudinal, and other predictors of attrition not typically corrected through weighting, such as: personality traits related to agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion and whether people like to do cognitive tasks (Lugtig, 2014); respondent satisfaction as panel members, interest level in politics, and degree of social connectedness (Frankel and Hillygus, 2014); and participants with poor health, those who rent homes, and single parents (Alvarez, James, and Lynn, 2023).

Common Method 2: Ignore the retention rate

Recruitment rate = 10%, Profiling rate = 60%, Retention rate = 30%, Survey Completion Rate = 60%

Reported Response Rate = 10% * 60% * 30% = 3.6%

AmeriSpeak Method 3: Inclusive method factoring in all nonresponse:

Recruitment rate = 10%, Profiling rate = 60%, Retention rate = 30%, Survey Completion Rate = 60%

Actual Response Rate = 10% * 60% * 30% * 60% = 1.08%

A simple table illustrates how misleading Methods 1 and 2 are: Overstating the actual response rate by a factor of 5,455% and 233%, respectively. The numbers are **bolded** that are included in the "response rate" calculation.

Exhibit 1

Components of Panel Response Rates	**Method 1** Survey Completion as "Response Rate"	**Method 2** Ignoring Retention Rate	**Method 3** Inclusive
Recruitment Rate	10.0%	**10.0%**	**10.0%**
Profile Rate	60.0%	**60.0%**	**60.0%**
Retention Rate	30.0%	30.0%	**30.0%**
Survey Completion Rate	**60.0%**	**60.0%**	**60.0%**
Actual All-In Response Rate	1.08%	1.08%	1.08%
Reported "Response Rate"	**60.0%**	**3.6%**	**1.08%**

AmeriSpeak's Perspective

We've done our best to access publicly available sources to document the real response rates of probability panels. Pew's American Trends Panel (which is not available to commercial buyers of

survey samples) is transparent about their response rate documentation, but the others are not. AmeriSpeak documents the real response rate (considering all sources of non-response) on every study we do and share every component of our response rate calculation. Being transparent with our clients is a core principle for AmeriSpeak.[2] We are an outlier (in a good way) on this point. No other commercially available probability panel openly discloses their real response rates.

The AmeriSpeak Panel response rate – a key measure of survey quality – is substantially higher than the response rate obtainable from any other available household panel.

AmeriSpeak has an all-in, inclusive response rate that is at least five times higher than our nearest competitor's response rate. How? *AmeriSpeak is the only consumer panel available that relies on Federal Express mailings, high incentives for participation, and in-person, face-to-face interviewing for the panel recruitment.* Our AmeriSpeak probability-based sample has an all-inclusive response rate of approximately 5% to 10% (considering the respective stages of panel recruitment, panel retention, and the survey cooperation rate), compared to approximately 1 percent other U.S. consumer probability-based panels. Exhibit 2 below summarizes and compares key features of AmeriSpeak vis-à-vis other probability panels.

Because of the high response rate obtained by AmeriSpeak and our use of in-person, face-to-face interviewing for the panel recruitment, ***we can provide an interviewed sample that is representative of the U.S. population, including hard-to-reach lower-income households, residents of rural areas, lesser educated persons, and those who are infrequent users of the internet.*** This is a data-quality benefit that is unique to AmeriSpeak.

[2] *See* AmeriSpeak's "Technical Overview" Documentation (available here) for information on these topics:

- Sample Frames for the AmeriSpeak Panel Recruitment
- Sample Selection for AmeriSpeak Panel Recruitment
- Panel Recruitment Procedures
- Transparency in Response Rate Reporting using AAPOR Standards
- Impact of Non-Response Follow-up on Representation of Hard-to-Reach Groups
- Use of Mixed-Mode Data Collection to Represent the Non-Internet and "Net-Averse" Households
- AmeriSpeak Panel Management and Maintenance
- AmeriSpeak Panel Weighting Procedures
- AmeriSpeak Client Study Weighting Procedures

Exhibit 2. Comparison of Key Features of AmeriSpeak and Other Probability Panels in the United States[3]

Key Panel Features	AmeriSpeak	Knowledge-Panel	American Trends Panel	Gallup Panel
Sample Frame	NORC National Frame/ABS	ABS, RDD	ABS	ABS, RDD
Household Sample Coverage Rate	97%	~92%	~92%	~92%
AAPOR Panel Recruitment Response Rate	32.9%[4]	9%[5]	N.P.A.	8%
Inclusive Response Rate[6]	5%-10%	~1%	~1%	N.P.A.
Panel Tenure	~3 years on average	N.P.A.	N.P.A.	N.P.A.
Mode of Data Collection for Client Surveys	Online + phone	Online only	Online only	Mail, online, phone

Always check the math.

When choosing a survey panel partner, always ask how they calculate their response rate. You may be surprised. Then call AmeriSpeak.

[3] "N.P.A." indicates that NORC was unable to locate this information from public sources.

[4] Based on survey sampling from AmeriSpeak panel recruitment years (2015-2018, 2020-2023) when AmeriSpeak used non-response follow-up campaigns that boosted the response rate.

[5] https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2023-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2022-description.htm. Last accessed July 10, 2024.

[6] The response rate is calculated using Method 3 ("Inclusive") to take into account all sources of nonresponse: the initial panel recruitment rate, the profile/connection rate (if applicable), the panel retention rate, and the study-specific survey completion rate.

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