

In late 1995 the European Science Foundation's programme Beliefs in Government (BiG) was completed and the research results were published in five volumes by Oxford University Press. BiG had involved a major stocktaking of changing political orientations of citizens in Western Europe relying exclusively on secondary analysis of existing data bases available in academic data archives. However, it had also revealed the extent to which 'white spots' in the landscape of data on social and political orientations were present across time and countries.

Blueprint for a European Social Survey (ESS)

An ESF scientific programme



The acknowledgement of both the need for, and the potential of, richer comparative data sets on European social and political change has motivated the ESF Standing Committee for the Social Sciences to develop a blueprint for a European Social Survey (ESS).

The ESS blueprint would entail, as its core element, a concept for a representative sample survey of the adult population of European nations to be conducted every second year with a mixture of fixed and variable questions. In order to enhance the analytical potential of the ESS, it is planned to add socio-statistical information from official sources and data on nation-specific institutional social and political arrangements from the countries and regions where individual survey respondents reside.

The preparation of the blueprint is planned to be completed by the end of 1998. This major initiative is seeking to define a 'large scale facility' for social science research, a research instrument measuring systematically at regular intervals citizens' attitudes relating to a core set of political, social and economic issues, whose data findings would be accessible to researchers through a coordinated network of national data archives and other facilities. It is hoped that, provided sufficient funds are forthcoming, the ESS will become a widely used instrument for primary comparative research, and an important element in the European infrastructure for social research.



The European Science Foundation acts as a catalyst for the development of science by bringing together leading scientists and funding agencies to debate, plan and implement pan-European initiatives.

Introduction

The development of integrated social science data for European comparative research is a pressing requirement if researchers are to have access to the depth of information they need to advise policy makers on key social developments in Europe. Based upon its experience with the highly successful *Beliefs in Government* programme, the ESF's Standing Committee for the Social Sciences has now focused its attention on the development of a blueprint for a *European Social Survey* (ESS) which would overcome the methodological problems of comparing countries' individual surveys.

In 1996, an Expert Group under the chairmanship of Professor Max Kaase (WZB, Berlin) completed an initial feasibility study. The Group's recommendations to move ahead with the development of a blueprint won the support of many ESF Member Organisations and led to the launch of the current ESS programme the following year. The blueprint is being developed through two committees made up of leading social science and survey experts. Overall management is in the hands of the ESS Steering Committee, while a Methodology Committee provides advice on detailed aspects of implementation.

Framing the European Social Survey

The launch of a *European Social Survey* would be a key element and stimulus in the building of an integrated social science database for European comparative research. An ESS would provide systematic and regular data on topics of major interest to the European social

science community and, as a facility, would encourage the comparative analysis of political, social and economic trends. Such analyses would also hold great potential value in terms of European and national policy-making.

Given the small number of, and the limitations in, academic comparative social science surveys in Europe, the ESS would not duplicate existing social science survey data collections. It would be a new effort in its own right. Also, given its planned emphasis on political, social and economic orientations of European citizens, it would not compete with, but rather be supplemented by, data collections conducted by national bureaux or by the European Bureau of the Census (Eurostat). The ESS would also be innovative in scholarly terms through its concern with the theory-guided combination of macro and micro data.

From the start, the ESS *European* focus would be designed to meet the specific needs of comparative research on nations and regions; a comparative 'core questionnaire' would be developed by a standing group of experts in social survey research from European countries. In this way, an ESS would enable all ESF member countries to benefit from the experience of those countries that have in the past already extensively mounted national social surveys. The ESS would act as a valuable instrument for the transfer of expertise across national boundaries and would not only improve methods of collection, but would also assist in building and developing national infrastructures for social research in those countries in which this expertise is presently still missing or is just in the process of being developed.

Research focus: choice of topics

A *European Social Survey* should essentially be a study measuring systematically, at regular intervals, citizens' attitudes and behaviours relating to a core set of political, social, and economic domains; it should not be a public opinion survey concerned with current topics and issues. The unique research focus of an ESS would be that the survey would be designed to reflect the needs of European comparative research and not just national research interests.

The general theme of an ESS should be *Monitoring the Political and Social Beliefs of Europeans*. A core set of questions would be devised under this broad topic, based upon a thorough scrutiny of variables that have proved their analytic value in the scholarly literature. A range of 'module topics' would then be chosen where it could be shown that substantial research gains could be made from a comparative analysis. 'Module topics' being examined by the ESS committees include: social mobility; social inequality; quality of life; values; national identity (including xenophobia); political orientations (attitudes and behaviour); economic orientations; 'Europeanisation'; mass media behaviour.

Survey design and methodological issues

The ESS designers aim to further the development of ground rules on methodology for comparative social survey research especially in the fields of sampling, measurement (data quality), correction of measurement errors and modes of comparative analysis (modelling; micro-macro linkages).



J. H. Smith

Influencing public attitudes in a traditional way: multiple layers of political posters (Rome 1994)

A major factor in the quality and usefulness of the ESS will be the underlying sampling design. The only acceptable procedure for selecting the potential respondents is a probability sample. Of course, given the different nature and quality of statistical information in the various countries on which selection procedures must be based, it is a matter for substantial scrutiny to assess the available sampling options, such as whether a design based on persons or on households will be recommended.

How potential respondents are sampled cannot be decided independently of the question of what the population is from which one samples. Given the increasing national mix of populations in the European nation states, the population to be sampled includes all individuals of a certain age resident in a given country at a given point of time in private households. The age at which somebody is defined as belonging to the relevant population will have to be decided upon. One option might be voting entitlement which is presently 18 years in most instances.

It is well-known that survey data cannot be 'tapped' from respondents as if it was an engineering process.

Scientific management

Respondents may interpret questions differently, especially with the cultural diversity in this proposed survey. Therefore, in the context of the ESS, resources will have to be devoted to methodological 'experiments' in which the optimal formulation of questions, the response categories used and the measurement procedures are considered in their own right.

Survey research knows two principal ways how to study change: (i) panels, where repeated measurements are taken from identical individuals across time, and (ii) the study of independent cross sections sampled over time from identical populations. While specific panel elements can be introduced at times for specific research demands, the need to contain the financial costs suggests that, like the *General Social Surveys*, the ESS should be conceptualised as an ongoing set of independent cross sections.

One central decision to be taken before implementing the ESS is the time interval at which the survey shall be conducted. Given the emphasis of the ESS on the study of medium to long-range change, the two most plausible options (in the light of previous research tailored to similar objectives) are to have it once a year or every second year. Bearing in mind all the operational and financial implications in devising and launching an ESS, the survey should probably be conducted initially in two 'waves' at two yearly intervals as a trial period.

Each participating ESF Member Organisation has nominated members of the Steering Committee whose task is to develop a detailed blueprint for a *European Social Survey*. The Steering Committee is chaired by Professor Max Kaase (Germany).

The two key tasks of the Steering Committee are:

- to set the framework for the ESS and reach recommendations on the selection of the module topics for inclusion in the survey;
- to identify and map the available qualified local research expertise and potential organisational base for the implementation of the ESS in each country.

The Steering Committee brings together key personnel and their collective knowledge of existing national social survey data and administrative level data.

In addition, the Steering Committee has established a Methodology Committee to undertake the detailed work on questionnaire wording, sampling implementation, mode of interviewing, and linkage to other relevant bodies. The Methodology Committee, chaired by Professor Roger Jowell (UK), is a smaller, more mobile Committee with partial membership overlap with the Steering Committee. The Methodology Committee's role is to provide advice on the above issues, but the final decision on recommendations rests with the Steering Committee.

The resulting proposal will have to specifically deal with the organisational implementation of the ESS. It will most likely require a stable scholarly and administrative base in order to cope with the many tasks related to the survey.

An important consequence of an ESS would be the strengthening of the relations between social scientists across Europe. Clearly, there is a common interest in this project and

many of the problems which are now tackled at a national level can be discussed and addressed internationally.

Future financing of the survey

The blueprint for a *European Social Survey* will be presented to both the national research councils and the relevant European Commission bodies in order to ascertain funding at least for the trial period.

The SCSS judges that an ESS should also be regarded as an essential element in the redefinition of the term 'large-scale facilities', which is needed to meet the requirements of European comparative social science research. An ESS, as a regular research instrument providing a European comparative database, could fulfil the equivalent need for the social scientist that the 'large-scale facility' does for the natural

scientist. An ESS would be a flexible 'large-scale facility' in the social sciences that could be disseminated and made accessible to researchers through the existing data archives network, CESSDA (Council of European Social Science Data Archives), and through other facilities already in place.

With this initiative, the SCSS hopes to achieve a major innovative step in fostering the necessary research infrastructure for effective comparative analysis of European citizens' values and attitudes in the face of political, social and economic change.

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