



**Michał Kotnarowski,**  
**PhD**

Sociologist and political scientist employed as an assistant professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. His research interests include electoral behavior, social stratification, political culture, and social research methodology.

He is a co-author of several books and more than a dozen articles.

He has published, among others, in *Party Politics*, *Electoral Studies*, *European Sociological Review*, as well as *Studia Socjologiczne* and *Studia Polityczne*.

He is affiliated with the Graduate School of Social Research at IFiS PAN (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences), where teaches courses on the application of quantitative methods in the social sciences.

He has lectured in the United States, Germany, Belgium, the Czech Republic, and Lithuania.

Since 2021, he has served as the national coordinator for Poland in the European Social Survey project.

kotnarowski@ifispan.edu.pl

When the Standard Collapses

# THE POLLING CRISIS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The traditional standard of social research has been exhausted. Is this the end of reliable opinion polls – or merely the beginning of a new chapter?

**Michał Kotnarowski**

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology  
of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw

**S**urveys are one of the most important tools for understanding what is happening in society – they are important today, and they may become even more so in the future.

## On the Benefits of Surveys

Data from scientific surveys are primarily used by a large community of scholars. For example, data from projects such as the European Social Survey (ESS) are applied across various disciplines, including sociology, political science, economics, public health and medicine, psychology, media studies, demography, and criminology. With such data, researchers can test hypotheses, compare attitudes across countries, track changes over time, and examine how certain social phenomena co-occur with others. Surveys also serve as a mirror for the public, helping people step out of their “filter bubbles” and see which attitudes are prevalent and which are marginal. They help debunk myths. It is commonly believed, for example, that young people are more concerned about climate change, while older people “no longer care.” Modern research presents a more complex picture: older people report concern about climate change to a degree comparable to that

of younger people. The theory that young people are unambiguously more engaged lacks stronger empirical support. In this way, surveys structure public debate by correcting hunches and stereotypes.

Similarly, surveys can be eye-opening in political disputes. For example, ESS data indicates that voters for parties commonly labelled as populist show a strong attachment to democratic principles, although their understanding of democracy differs from that of other parties’ constituencies. That is why it is worth referring to survey data, as they reveal aspects of the world that are not visible in everyday experience.

The knowledge derived from surveys should also be important for decision-makers. Surveys should not encourage people to blindly follow the most popular opinion. Instead, they can support the design and implementation of policies by providing insight into how proposed solutions are perceived, what people fear, which aspects encounter resistance, and which are deemed acceptable. When used effectively, surveys become a tool for governmental responsiveness: they help authorities understand how to communicate objectives and adjust specific measures. They may also reveal that some ideas – although theoretically well founded – lack social acceptance and therefore require either better explanation or modification.

Contemporary challenges are yet another area in which surveys play an important role. Addressing such challenges requires more than technical expertise alone. In fields such as climate change mitigation, both findings of geosciences and other exact sciences – including risk assessment, feasible reduction pathways, and cost-benefit analysis – and social insights



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– such as public trust in science, risk perception, willingness to make sacrifices, and the conditions that foster behavioral change – are necessary. Without these social insights, even the best technical solutions will remain unimplemented. From this perspective, the social sciences – particularly survey research – play a complementary role to exact sciences by providing knowledge about attitudes, barriers, and motivations, without which effective implementation is impossible.

For all the reasons outlined above, the quality of survey research is of crucial importance. Surveys must be conducted with the utmost care, using carefully selected samples, well-tested questions, and transparent methodologies. Only under these conditions can they serve as a reliable source of knowledge for science, society, and politics. However, this is precisely where the challenge facing researchers today arises.

## Ideal vs. Reality?

Let us consider for a moment what a model survey would look like. First, we begin with the sampling frame, which is a complete record of all individuals

belonging to the population. From this register, we randomly select – with a predetermined probability – the individuals who will participate in the study. We then contact each of them, conduct interviews or ask them to complete the survey themselves, and subsequently analyze the data. This process allows us to determine the distribution of responses and the average values of the characteristics under study.

Because we are working with a representative sample, we do not observe the entire population; however, we do know the random selection mechanism. This knowledge allows us to estimate population proportions and mean values, indicate the ranges in which the true values are most likely to lie, and determine the probability of error.

This type of inference is based on two strong assumptions: first, that we are able to select a truly random sample – that is, we have a complete population register, know each individual's probability of selection, and carry out the random selection accordingly – and second, that all selected individuals participate in the study. In practice, these assumptions are often not met.

Presentation of the report results of the 11th round of the European Social Survey, April 7, 2025

The classic model, implemented to a high standard in the ESS, assumes random selection of a sample from a population register (in Poland, the PESEL register) combined with systematic efforts to contact all selected individuals. The problem is that some individuals ultimately prove to be unreachable. Just 30–40 years ago, when completion rates of 70–80% were achievable, such difficulties were acknowledged but considered acceptable. Today, the situation is considerably worse. Even with the utmost diligence, achieving approximately 50% of completed interviews is regarded as a success, while 30–40% is often considered acceptable. This means that we do not speak to most of the randomly selected individuals, nor do we know how they differ from those who participate in the survey. The problem is further exacerbated by changes in the survey-interviewing labor market: fewer people are willing to do fieldwork, and interviewer networks increasingly rely on older, well-trained individuals, whose numbers are declining. Changes in lifestyle also make it more difficult to reach people in their homes for interviews. Moreover, the sense of purpose associated with participation has diminished, as many people now associate surveys with rapid marketing exercises rather than rigorous scientific research.

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The commercial sector operates differently in this respect. Initially, telephone interviews took the market by storm; today, surveys are conducted predominantly online. Their primary advantage is obvious: they are cheaper. There is no need to send interviewers into the field, organize travel, or provide salaries. All that is required is to prepare a questionnaire, send out invitations, and wait for the respondents to complete the survey themselves. However, these cost savings come with a methodological problem: most such studies are not based on random samples drawn from the population register. The typical mechanism is self-recruitment into a panel – individuals sign up voluntarily, a database of participants is created, and respondents are recruited from it. As a result, we do not know the population from which the respondents are drawn, nor the probability of their inclusion in the sample. Consequently, we cannot reliably

estimate sampling errors, nor can we determine whom such studies actually describe. This does not mean that such surveys are useless; they can be helpful for certain business purposes. However, they can hardly be regarded as a solid basis for drawing conclusions about society as a whole.

For years, it was believed that there was a “gold standard” that could be pursued. Surveys achieved high completion rates and were conducted by robust networks of well-trained interviewers. All of this was supported by extensive methodological literature describing sources of error and ways to mitigate them. The European Social Survey was an emanation of this accumulated knowledge. Regrettably, it has become clear that this paradigm has run its course. Sample completion rates have dropped dramatically, and the high costs of traditional survey research have compounded the problem. It is also increasingly difficult to find institutions capable of conducting face-to-face interviews in accordance with these exacting standards – many countries now have only one such organization. A striking example comes from the Czech Republic in 2023, where during the 11th round of the ESS, an attempt to conduct face-to-face surveys failed because no institution – public or private – was willing to carry out the project at the required level. As a result, conducting surveys “the old way” is becoming both increasingly expensive and of declining quality. We, therefore, find ourselves in crisis of a particular paradigm and are compelled to reinvent our approach.

## What Now?

One of the solutions toward which the ESS is gravitating is to reduce the role of interviewers in the main phase in favor of surveys completed independently, while still maintaining a random selection from the full register of residents. In Poland, this involves drawing lots from the PESEL register and sending out invitation letters. Randomly selected individuals can then choose how to participate: by completing a paper survey and returning it in a prepaid envelope or by filling it in online. This approach makes the main phase cheaper while retaining the foundation of representativeness, since the sample is still drawn from the sampling frame rather than relying on self-recruitment.

Experience from Poland is instructive. In 2022, the ESS was conducted using self-completed questionnaires, yielding 39% of the planned sample. Two years later, a face-to-face study achieved a completion rate of 41%. The difference in quality is minimal, but the difference in cost is substantial. The composition of participants also varies by mode: direct interviews tend to overrepresent older, rural residents, while self-completed surveys attract a relatively higher number of young, working, and better-educated people.

The 12th round of the ESS will be a significant experiment: the sample has been divided into two equal parts across all European countries participating in the study – one conducted via of self-completed surveys, the other face-to-face. This design will allow us to compare the selection patterns in both techniques – that is, to identify which groups are over- or underrepresented – and to evaluate the societal picture obtained with each method.

The proposed transition to self-completed surveys is an attempt to address the ongoing crisis. It is not yet clear whether it will prove effective we are testing it on a living system – but it is an experiment we must undertake. Even if this direction is confirmed, many questions will remain unanswered, as the processes that occur when a respondent completes a questionnaire independently – on paper, a computer or a smartphone – are still poorly understood. It is necessary to determine how responses are influenced by the interface, by the absence of an interviewer, by the way people process long questions, and by how individuals who rarely read or are functionally illiterate handle the survey. This creates a new theoretical and methodological research agenda.

This does not signal the end to face-to-face interviews. They are likely to remain necessary, especially in studies involving older populations or locations requiring direct contact. However, their role will diminish, and the burden of data collection will shift toward cheaper and more flexible methods. At the same time, the question arises of how much classic survey data are needed in a world increasingly flooded with behavioral information – an answer that requires further investigation.

## Or Maybe It Is the End of Surveys?

Let us consider this question: could behavioral data solve the crisis described above? Records of our activities – how we move around the city, our purchase history, likes and comments on social media, and data from smartphones, computers, and payment cards – all reveal much about us. Based on patterns of behavior on social media, it is even possible to predict which party someone will vote for or whether they will turn out at the polling station.

However, this is not the full answer. Both social researchers and policymakers are interested not only in what people do, but also in why they do it – that is, in their motivations and values, how they reason, and what triggers their decisions. Observing behavior alone does not reveal these factors. We need survey data that allows us to “look inside the black box – into human ways of thinking and interpreting the world. Moreover, only part of the population typically

the more active and “visible” individuals – leave digital traces, which does not capture a cross-section of society. Research on random, representative samples provides a way to reconstruct the distribution of attitudes and motivations among the general public. Behavioral data are derived “post factum,” whereas in a survey, the researcher constructs questions and directs them to respondents on topics they wish to understand. This approach allows hypotheses to be tested that cannot be directly addressed through behavioral data alone.

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This does not mean that behavioral datasets are not worth using. They offer advantages: they are often less costly, less prone to memory errors, and reflect activities that were actually observed. But they do not tell the whole story. They are not sufficient on their own to fully explain what happens to people – and why. The strongest strategy is to combine both approaches: use hard observations of behavior where available, and surveys where it is necessary to uncover motivations and meanings that are not visible in logs and receipts.

## Let’s Take Part in Surveys!

To summarize: we truly need survey data. Surveys allow us to describe what society is like and how it is changing, which opinions are dominant and which remain marginalized, what norms and values matter, what prompts people to take specific actions, what they fear, and what they enjoy. The problem is that the current research model has been exhausted due to practical constraints. It is necessary to reinvent surveys: test new techniques, combine approaches, correct distortions, and integrate data sources to obtain a reliable picture of society as a whole.

However, there is one crucial condition: the cooperation of respondents. Reliable results require the participation of those selected for the sample – including individuals who are not interested in politics or public life. Only then will everyone’s voice be heard, and the data can be used to accurately describe reality and guide sound decisions for all of us.

Therefore, let me end with my appeal: let’s take part in surveys, especially scientific ones! The quality of our knowledge about society depends on our willingness to speak. ■

Further reading:

More information about the planned transition from interviews to self-completed surveys as part of the European Social Survey can be found using the following link (material in English): <https://europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/methodology/data-collection-sc>

ESS project website: [ess.ifispan.pl](http://ess.ifispan.pl), [europeansocialsurvey.org](http://europeansocialsurvey.org)