

## **Online Research in Political Science: A Meta-Analysis of the Scope and Profile of a Rising Trend (2005-2015)**

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### **Abstract**

The use of online resources in political science research has been steadily growing in the last decades. Among the online research tools, web surveys have apparently been increasingly used. Notwithstanding this perception, little is known regarding the patterns of this trend. Aiming at contributing to fulfil this gap, we characterize the scope and profile of the research using online surveys in political science. We use a meta-analysis supporting on a broad sample of articles using web surveys published in international academic journals (a total of 211 articles, 229 web survey studies, and 17 journals), between 2005 and 2015. This time span covers a period when the internet usage among researchers supposedly knew a significant growth. Our goal is to characterize how online surveys have been used in this past decade in political science, supporting on two main dimensions of analysis: the scope, regarding the geographical and chronologic aspects of the research; and the profile, reporting to the methodological features and the goals of the research.

**Key-words:** online research resources, online surveys, political science, meta-analysis

## **Introduction**

Contemporary societies have information and 'informatisation' at its heart (Webster, 1995; Buffardi, 2011). A core element of this fact is the spread in the use of Internet. As nowadays in the other social fields, in the political realm, Internet is significantly and increasingly part of almost every aspect of political life. Some examples displaying how the Internet has changed political processes are the following: i) a large part of electoral campaigns are conducted online, ii) political blogs have developed to an alternative source of political news, iii) citizens have increasing Internet opportunities to participate politically (eg. using blogs, or social networks).

In order to study and analyse these developments, political scientists had to employ new research methods. A growing part of the work of a political researcher is considered to have moved to cyberspace (Nentwich, 2008), meaning that the amount of work a given researcher is able to perform has increased, as its scope broadened the amount of data one is able to analyse (Kaase, 2000; Calise and De Rosa, 2008). Although offline methods may be more valid and accessible for political research (Horiuchi, Imai and Taniguchi, 2007; Barber et al, 2014), online methods potentially represent innovative and inspiring investigation tools. The replacement of traditional qualitative offline methods to online ones (eg. the adoption of online focus group interviews to research hidden or sensitive political topics), or the use of online panel surveys to research political behaviour, are two among many examples of response to such new challenges. Among them, it is worth highlighting the case of the usage of web surveys, which seems to have been evidencing a fast growing trend over time (Strandberg 2008, Roscoe and Jenkins 2005, D'Alessio and Allen 2000), Imbeau et al., 2001, Doucouliagos and Ulubasoglu 2008, Bishop and Smith 2001, Kaase 2000). These events evidence a growing presence of Internet in political science research, particularly of web surveys, implying that the analysis of such research trends has become a topic of relevance.

Contrasting to other research fields in social sciences, there is no systematic culture of collective knowledge-sharing in political science in the sense that there are no institutionalized mechanisms of sharing the 'state-of-the-art' of relevant topics, summarised in accessible, transparent and critical format that would allow the community to discover the broad picture of research in that area (Nentwich, 2008: 226; Buffardi, 2011: 216-222; Hunter and Schmidt, 2015: 26-34). This kind of research approach enables to clarify the status of research topics whose findings have been ambiguous or whose global overview of the research trends is, of yet, not clear, being also useful to correct sampling or measurement errors (Hunter and Schmidt, 2015). In that sense, it can be used to assess the real profile of the research using this tool. Meta-

analysis is, therefore, a useful approach to learn about the trends in specific research fields, such as is the case of this piece of research.

This research aims at summarizing how online surveys impacted research in political science in the last decade. Assuming that it is important to have a better knowledge of the patterns of online research solutions that are adopted in political science, and strictly focusing in web surveys, it aims at characterizing the scope and profile of web surveys use in political science, supporting in a time span correspondent to the period when such use was supposedly more intense, the last decade (2005-2015). The scope of web surveys reports to the geographical and chronologic aspects of the published research; and the profile to the methodological features and the goals of such research. A meta-analysis is applied to a broad sample of articles using web surveys published in international academic journals.

This article first presents the literature contextualization and the research goals, and then the data selection procedures and methods. After that it presents a comprehensive assessment of the scope and profile of the use of online surveys in political science research supporting in a meta-analytic research design.

### **The state of research in political science using e-tools: The case of web surveys**

The strong relationship between the Internet and politics has inspired the establishment of research groups which focus their research on this field: at APSA there are two organized sections: the Information Technology and Politics section was established first and it covers almost every subject that links politics not only with Internet but, more generally, with computer science. More recently the APSA organised a section on Political Networks, which focuses on the analysis of Political Networks (some of them already existed in the Internet). In the European continent the largest group with research focus on this field is the ECPR Standing Groups on Internet and Politics.

However, in general, when compared to other research fields, in political science the impact of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) or generally the recognition of the new online environment as a major event with huge potentialities towards empirical research, has not been as consequential (Kaase, 2000; Calise and De Rosa, 2008). Indeed, it is acknowledged that there are very few articles monitoring and debating e-changes in the research environment in the major political science journals (Calise and De Rosa, 2008: 596). Thus, political science seems to have been spending less efforts than other sciences taking advantage of this emerging

and extremely rich e-environment and, similarly, has been less interested in the implications of e-research, over the past decades.

The usage of internet based resources is, nevertheless, considered to increase the ability of researchers in general, and political scientists in particular, to dramatically improve their performance (Kaase, 2000). Several authors wrote about how the internet resources are able to change the research trends among political scientists, even going as far as concluding that there are several potential advantages, which would amount to using online resources (Kaase 2000, Webster 1995, Calise and De Rosa 2008, Buffardi 2011). In this vein, one of the most prominent characteristics of web survey administration is the cost saving potential it enables (Kaase, 2000; Orr, 2005:266; Buffardi, 2011; Primo, 2013). This advantage also intertwines with efficiency, population accessibility, the ability to introduce question controls, and time saving advantages (Orr 2005:266, Lyu, 2007, Fridkin et al 2008). The ability to place sample controls in real time, when running experiments is also mentioned as a plus (Horiuchi et al, 2007; Jerit, 2009), as well as the technological capabilities allowed by software, such as pictures, videos among others (Orr, 2005:266).

Although scarce, some research have focused on the importance of Internet in political science. It has namely focused on the analysis of publication in e-journals and broadly on the forms of online publications and electronic communication (Kaase, 2000; Nentwich, 2008). Significant research has as well been conducted on the impact of web 2.0 to politics, and how social media facilitates the formation of Politics 2.0 (Chadwick, 2008; Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla and Williams, 2010; Maarek, 2014). Only scant research has been devoted to understanding the kind of research that has been done supported on Internet tools, specifically on online surveys, and, as far as we know, none used a meta-analysis approach to offer a broad encompassing scenario of online research trends.

Even though the scarcity of sources in this particular area, there are some important research using meta-analysis strategies, such as Lau's and colleagues (Lau et al., 2007) on the effects of negative political campaigns, where the authors survey the relevant research projects on the topic and, based on a data collection matrix, summarize its main characteristics and conclusions, which brought a new insight on the effective (low) importance of negative campaigns on winning votes. Other relevant examples are: the research on the effects of democracy on economic growth (Doucouliagos and Ulubasoglu, 2008); on campaign contributions and roll call votes (Roscoe and Jenkins, 2005); on partisan media bias in election campaigns (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000); on party composition of government and policy outputs (Imbeau et al., 2001);

or on the response-order effects (Bishop and Smith, 2001). Meta-analysis has also been used in the analysis of parties' websites to assess the effects that online party campaigning has on party competition (Strandberg, 2008).

This previous research provide a solid orientation on how to replicate it to the study of the usage of online surveys in political science research. However, on our study, meta-analysis will not only be applied on the findings of the research that is at stake, but also on how it has methodologically been conducted.

## **Data and Methods**

Meta-analysis is (ideally) supported in the universe of available findings of a research topic, searching on the published literature in order to draw inferences on that topic. It provides summary information, which allows for the validation and generalization of results, which single studies are unable to do, contributing to solve theoretical and empirical debates, to illuminate more obscure areas of research, and, as a consequence, to improve theoretical construction. This analysis assumes that individual studies, contained within the articles, are the cases to be studied and, for that reason, we are as close to fully understand the phenomenon under study as the sample approaches the entire universe. Treating research papers as data points enables to built a data set, supporting on relevant variables, and to perform statistical analysis.

This paper applies meta-analysis to a sample of academic articles reporting research supported on the use of online surveys between 2005 and 2015. It is based on a sample of 211 articles, corresponding to a total of 229 studies using web surveys<sup>1</sup>, in 17 political science journals, whose scope encompasses this kind of research technique. Journals were selected if they had a minimum number of relevant articles, till reaching a saturation point (see Appendix for the full list of journals and corresponding number of articles). The criterion for an article's selection was that it reported to a research carried on using an online survey. Only articles that have been published in international academic journals were considered (but not exclusively indexed journals) which provides a general control for research quality.

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<sup>1</sup> The reason why there are more studies than articles is due to the fact that several of the articles actually make use of different web survey studies. This is the reason why we use studies, and not, merely, the articles, as such wouldn't portray the full reality of such studies.

Usually, meta-analysis samples of articles have tended to be rather low. For instance, studies used samples sizes of 16 studies (Strandberg, 2008), 30 (Roscoe and Jenkins, 2005); 43 (Imbeau et al., 2001); 59 (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000); 95 (Doucouliagos and Ulubasoglu, 2008), or 176 (Bishop and Smith, 2001), although generating far more measurements since a single article may have had more than one measurement (for example when the dependent variable is a regression coefficient). In this context, our sample is quite large and was intended to approach the universe of relevant journals and articles fulfilling the requirement of reporting to research using web surveys in the field of political science.

Contrarily to most research using a meta-analytic design, the cases were not selected by tracking the topic using key-words, cross-referencing or other similar strategy of the bibliographic search to find relevant cases. Since, in our case, the relevant articles could not be efficiently found through those search strategies, because we needed not to detect the research topic but the technique underlying the research, a sample of relevant journals were previously selected and then thoroughly surveyed in order to select all the articles that met our criterion. Although more unusual, this option enables us to longitudinally and comparatively assess the trend on the use of online surveys based on a common ground, which is our sample of relevant journals.

A fact that such be addressed is the lack of homogenization in the reference to online research questionnaires. There is an array of expressions being used, such as: web survey, online survey, internet survey, or email survey. Assuming that there are no significant differences among these tools, as in all cases there is a common support in a survey being held on an online platform in order to reach a target population, which is the focus in this paper, we simply adopt the web survey expression. The main method of researching literature concerning a given topic, since the introduction of online resources (Webster, 1995; Kaase, 2000), is by using online search engines, be them Google Scholar, B-on or internal Journal search engines. By not having a uniform designation for these online research techniques this potentially hinders the ability of finding the desired results. To collect the relevant articles to our dataset, we researched all the above-mentioned expressions to designate online questionnaires.

As generally done in research supported on meta-analysis strategies, a matrix was built in order to collect the data using a common metric. The variables used are: year of publication and last year the study reports to; geographical location of the study; type of the sample; type of the analysis; response rate; goals and main research topic; advantages and limitations in the study.

## Findings

Starting our analysis by assessing our sample's characterization, we will be looking at the authors' gender, the number of authors and impact factor of each publication gathered for our study. First of, when it comes to gender, it should be pointed that there is a clear unbalance between the distribution of male and female authors, with the later standing at only 31,7% of our sample, while males peak up at 68,3%.

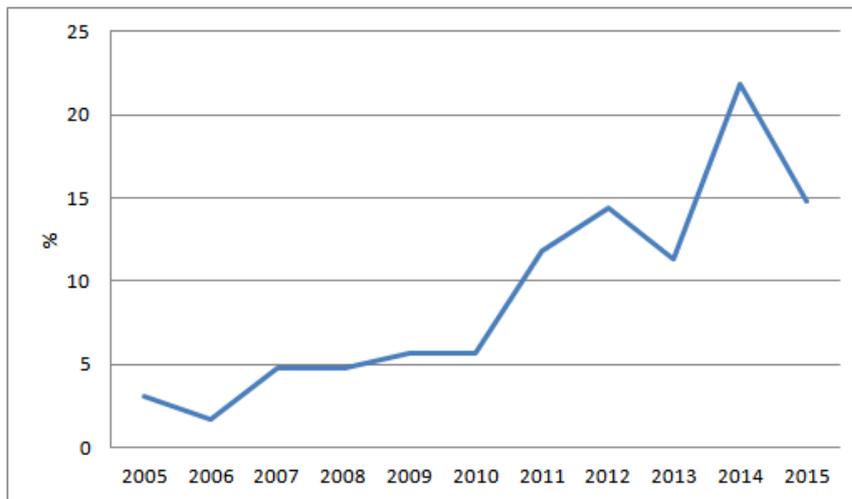
As to the number of authors per study, we were able to verify that up to three authors per study comprises the large majority of those (88,2%), while, at the same time, the mode dictates that 40,2% of all studies were conducted by two authors, which is congruent with the median (two authors) and the mean (2,34 authors on average). There are, however, 7,9% of studies authored by four individuals, bringing the cumulative total to up to 96,1%, and deeming our findings of studies with five to eight authors quite marginal (only a total of 3,9%). We were also able to state that the distributions follows, roughly, a normal curve.

Finally, when it comes to the impact factor, there is no clear trend to be shown. According to our methodological choices, we opted to analyze journals of international scope within the area of political science, meaning the impact factor reflects the general evaluation of said journals, per year. However, we must point out that the maximum impact factor was 4,66 and the minimum was 0,41, at an average of 1,88 (14,4% of the articles were not published in indexed journals).

### *The scope of web-surveys use in political science*

When it comes to the general scope of web-survey use, we have analysed, not only the year of publication of such studies, but also, the year of which these same studies were reported. As such, we must observe that, up until 2014, there was a rising trend, among the studies published, with it generally rising (with a slight drawback in 2013, from 14,4% in 2012, back to 11,4%, a similar percentage to 2011, with 11,8%), going up from 3,1% (2005) and only 1,7% (2006) to a peak of 21,8% in 2014, and once again falling in 2015. Also, one can observe that from 2010 (5,7%) to 2011, there was a boom of web-survey studies based publications. Since our findings stop at this higher bound of 2015 (14,8%, still much higher than before 2010), and that there was a drawback in 2013, we cannot draw any stance as to if there was a decline in web-survey publication based studies.

Figure 1. Year of publication



However, publications use studies ran in previous years, therefore the analysis was drawn, in order to capture the general trend of web-survey studies ran, over time, in Figure 2. The analysis shows that, while there was a general growth of use up until 2010 (when it peaked at 16,3% of all studies with this information reported), there was, as well, a steady decline in the report of such studies, down until 2014 (2,0%). This also means that over 50% of all studies report to the years of 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011. Part of this is explained by the fact that the authors take time to run the studies, analyze, write the papers and submit them to publication, while also considering that our scope goes, only, until 2015, this also means that this value would probably increase if we were to include publications with studies in years after (namely 2016 and 2017).

Studies using web-surveys in political science topics usually report to more than one year (only 25,8% report to a single year, while 62,4 report to more than one year). More than a quarter of the studies are case studies, and only a few are comparative, respectively: 79,5% and 18,8%. Comparative research may, indeed, be exceptionally demanding in resources (technical and financial) regarding this kind of research.

Figure 2. Last year the study reports to

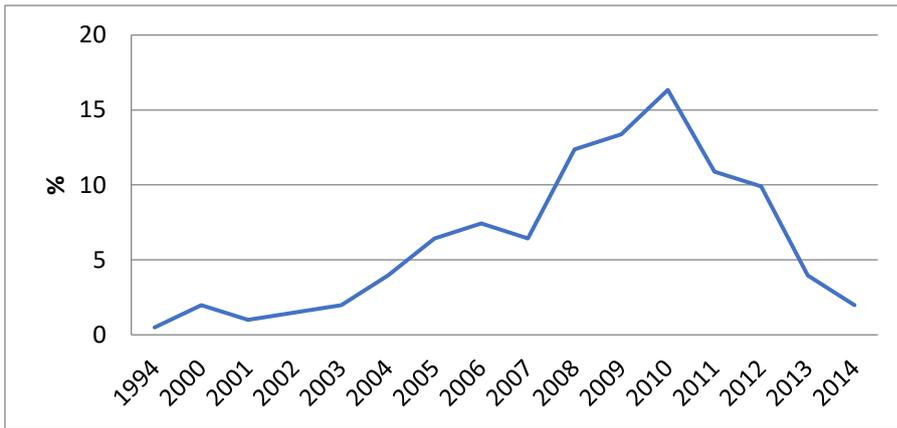
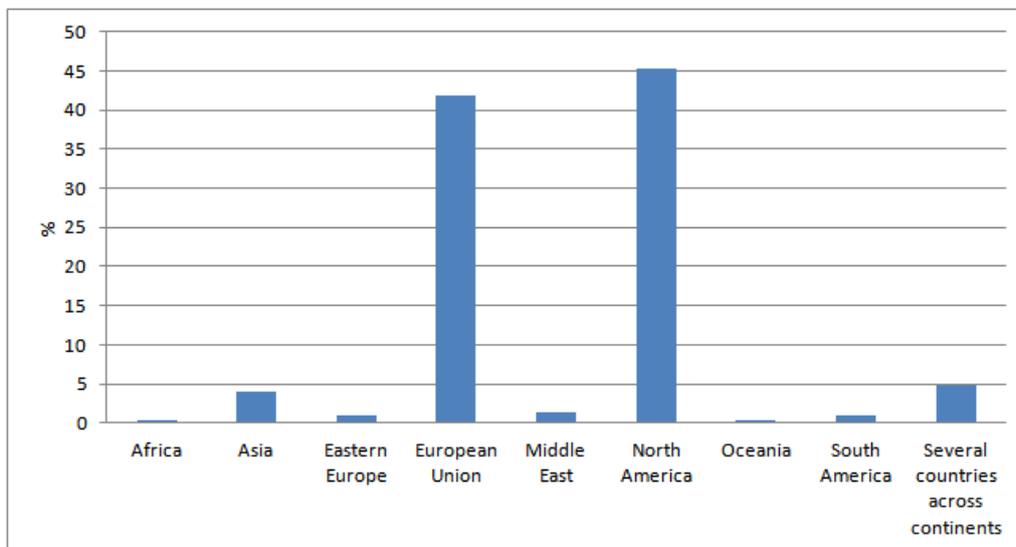


Figure 3. Location of the study

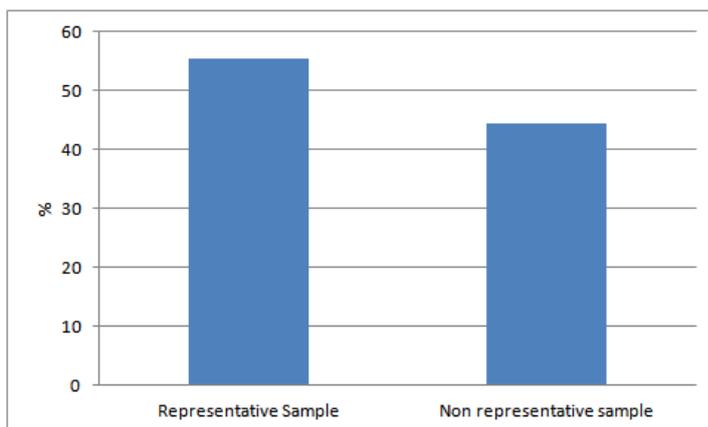


Studies mainly report to countries in the European Union (almost 42% of the sample of studies) and North America (more than 45% percent), as Figure 3 shows. The other regions in the globe are practically non-represented with regard to using this technique for political science research. Indeed, Europe and North America are leading regions in political science research and, for that reason, it is not surprising that these regions also reveal a greater expression of studies using this toll.

### *The profile of web-surveys use in political science*

There is a prevailing idea that studies using online survey respondents mainly use non-probability sampling. This fact is usually mentioned when disadvantages of web surveys are discussed, under the argument that it is difficult to obtain a representative sample of a given population (Albrecht, 2006; Rosar et al, 2008; Kriner and Schickler, 2014), as the data selection carries a bias for the fact that internet coverage is, still, not universal, and being mostly used by more highly educated and younger individuals (Kaase, 2000: 267-269). There is a problem in random sample selection due to the lack of registration of the population of internet users. Therefore, these studies are supposedly supported in listserves, discussion forums, newsgroups, among others. Indeed there are numerous examples of such options. For instance, Chen (2005), Aström and Granberg (2007) and Maguire (2008), all of them made use of such alternative solutions to be able to explore their respective objects (US mayors, Heads of Planning Departments in Sweden and District Candidates). Additionally, the literature has been pointing that "email surveys have been used to study small scale homogeneous groups of online users" and that only occasionally such method was used to administer national surveys (see Mann and Stewart, 2000: 69, for a revision of such literature). Obviously, these studies were not able to obtain external validity, but were able to get answers in a less demanding manner (namely lowering financial costs).

Figure 4. Type of sample

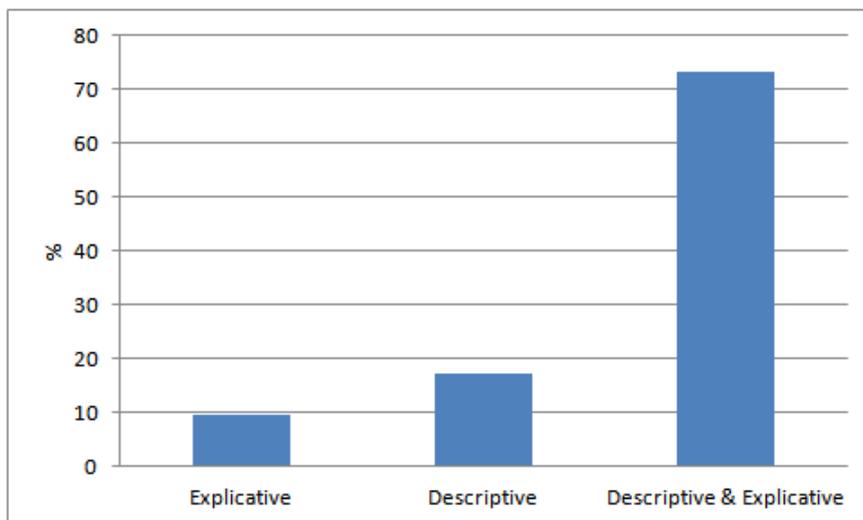


The objective of these non-probability sampling web surveys is specially to provide exploratory insights over a given particular issue. However, web surveys' research do not necessarily use this kind of method as the way to question specific and, often times, difficult to reach

populations. This is precisely what our data shows (see Figure 4). Most of the research cases in our sample (around 55% of the studies) used probabilistic samples which allow the extrapolation of results (around 44% used non-representative sample procedures). This means that although most of the web surveys studies in political science try to reach their population using non-traditional sample procedures, they manage to use alternative options that ensure a probabilistic sample, and therefore, statistical representation. The main challenge to reach representation regards the difficulty in identifying the population in a web platform, especially when internet access (even as off 2017) is not universal, as older populations tend to be info excluded.

As regards to the type of analysis (Figure 5), it follows the usual pattern of political science publications, encompassing both a descriptive analysis as well as descriptive. It is however worth mentioning that the percentage of pieces of research only using a descriptive analysis is not completely negligible, representing around 17% of all the cases in the sample.

Figure 5. Type of analysis

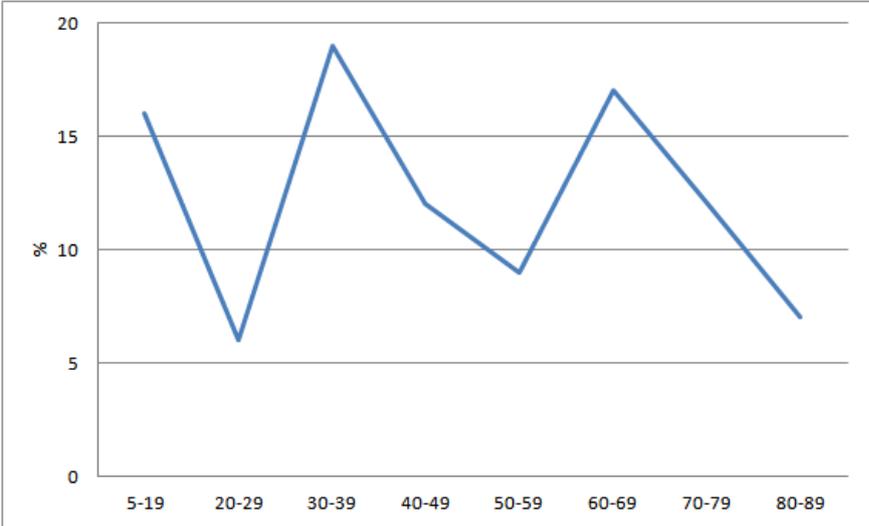


The potential lack of accountability, as respondents do not need to directly contact the interviewer, thus contributing to reduce the amount of responses, is considered a limitation underlying the use of web surveys (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 69; Dubrow, 2011). However, our findings report that the response rate varies immensely, between studies, with 53% of these studies reporting a response rate below 50% (with 47% reporting equal or above 50% response rate), and only 22% being below a response rate of 30%. Indeed, we are able to observe that a

considerable amount (19%) reported response rates above 70%. Nevertheless, we must point out, interestingly, that most of the studies gathered did not report a response rate for the used study (about 57,2% of all 229 studies).

This means that although the literature identifies response rates as a limitation for this technique, our data points to the direction that this might not be necessarily true, indicating that researchers should take into consideration other factors conditioning and otherwise enticing the respondents to answer web-surveys.

Figure 6. Response rate



The articles' goals are very diverse and no clear pattern emerges from our data. However, it is possible to recognize a slight stronger emphasis in issues such as political participation (namely using ICT), as well as electoral campaigns and the use of ICT by political elites, although the latter in a lesser extent. Figure 7 presents the most research topics using this technique.

Figure 7. Main topic of the study

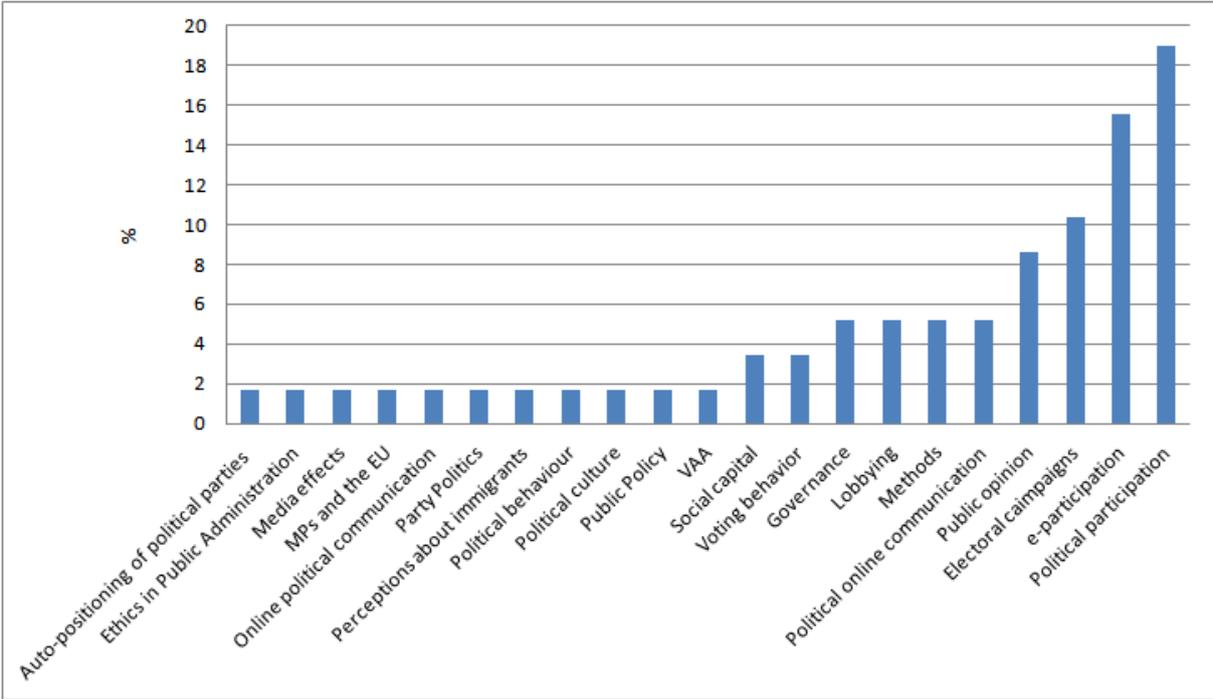
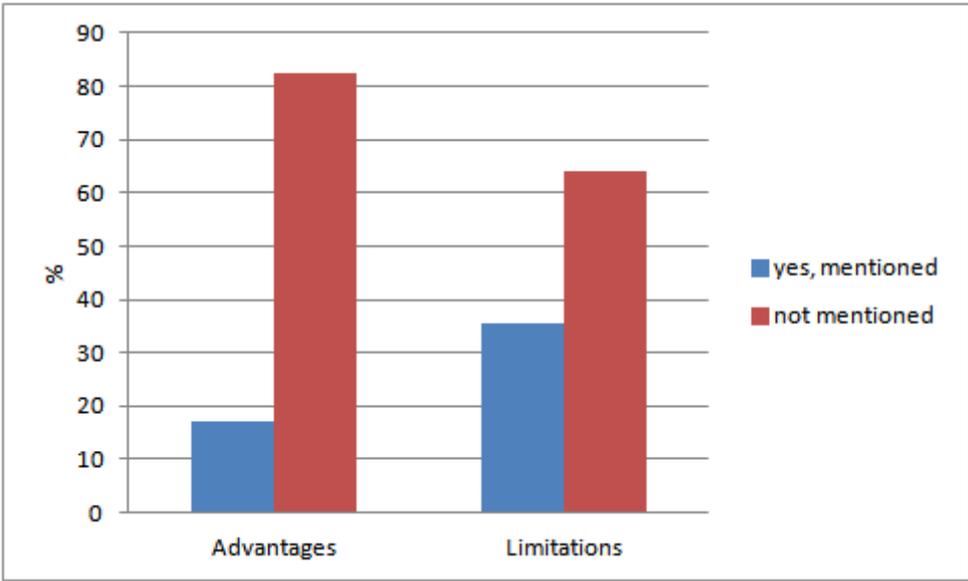


Figure 8. Acknowledgement of advantages and/or limitations in the study



Many researches have discussed the advantages and limitations on the use of web-surveys research tools (eg. Mann and Stewart, 2000). In Figure 8, we report if the mentioning of the advantages and disadvantages of said technique is done by each study. Our analysis allows us to observe that, overwhelmingly, most studies do not report either the advantages (82,9%) nor the limitations of web-survey use (64,2%) and, interestingly, the mention of the limitations is

more frequent than that of the advantages of such use. This may be due to the concern of the authors to report their own reservations and some level of sceptical understanding of web survey use, being more important than the simple report of what are their gains, while using this method.

Nevertheless, it is still somewhat difficult to draw any definitive conclusions, since the levels of report of both advantages and limitations found by the authors, while running web surveys, is quite low, which could be attributed to factors such as the demands of the journals and reviewers.

## **Conclusions**

(TO BE WRITTEN)

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