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Getting in the Door: Sampling and Completing Elite Interviews

Many factors are important when it comes to conducting high quality elite interviews. As my colleagues have noted in their presentations in San Francisco and in their essays in this issue, gaining valid and reliable data from elite interviews demands that researchers be well prepared, construct sound questions, establish a rapport with respondents, know how to write up their notes, and code responses accurately and consistently. Improving these skills will certainly reduce the amount of measurement error contained in interview data. Unfortunately, none of these skills matter if you do not get the interview. In other words, everything that my colleagues have talked about depends on getting in the door, getting access to your subject. A well-prepared personable researcher who would be able to control an open-ended and wide-ranging interview, while establishing a strong informal rapport with an elite respondent will never get to demonstrate his or her interviewing skills—or ability to decrease measurement error—if the meeting never takes place. Fur-

thermore and fundamentally, systematic error will also be introduced if researchers only get access to certain types of respondents.

Frankly, “getting the interview” is more art than science and, with few

exceptions, political scientists are not particularly well known for our skill at the art of “cold calling.” Even the most charming political scientist may find it difficult to pick up the phone and call the offices of powerful and busy government officials or lobbyists and navigate through busy receptionists and wary schedulers. Still, there are systematic commonsense things that you can do to make it more likely that you will “get the interview.” In addition, understanding how the goals of your project interact with the process of gaining access can help you to understand the types of error that are introduced into a study by what will be your unavoidable inability to interview some legislators, staffers, lobbyists, or judges. In this essay, I provide a few tips that should improve your chances of getting interviews and draw from work in survey research to outline a framework for understanding what sorts of error is introduced when researchers fail to get in the door. I illustrate some of these points with my own work as well as the work of colleagues.

There are three basic goals that researchers have when conducting elite interviews:

(1) gathering information from a sample of officials in order to make generalizable claims about all such officials’ characteristics or decisions; (2) discovering a particular piece of information or getting hold of a particular document; (3) informing or guiding work that uses other sources of data. Consistent with this last point, elite interviews can and should also be used to provide much needed context or color for our books and journal articles. In this essay I focus on research with the first sort of goal. Nevertheless, although the consequences of failing to get in the door may be less severe in the latter two cases, researchers want to make sure that they gather factual information and have their research informed from sources with different points of view. Even when one does not aim to generalize from interviews, researchers should obviously still strive to confirm the accuracy of documents and information. No matter the goal, good research practice demands that one use multiple sources.

At its core, “getting the interview” is a sampling issue. We typically think of the two research modes as distinct. Still, elite interviewers hoping to gather generalizable information about an entire population of decisions or decision makers can learn much from colleagues in survey research about sampling and about how nonresponse can lead to biased results. In the survey research world, we talk about random error and nonrandom error (systematic error.) Random error is sampling error and is the unavoidable noise that characterizes any research that tries to estimate a larger population’s characteristics from a smaller number of cases. Random error is a function of variance in the target population (if just about everyone in the target population has the same characteristics or attitudes, error is less) and the number of sampling units (the more sampling units, the less noisy the estimate.) Although matters can become a bit complicated with multistage designs, sampling theory is a well-developed area and calculating sampling error (the plus or minus figure that is dutifully reported in all publicly released polls) is a fairly straightforward exercise.

Many factors can introduce nonrandom error and it is difficult if not impossible to measure with precision. Measurement problems are obviously a major source of nonrandom error and many of the essays in this collection focus on reducing measurement error. Nonresponse can also introduce significant systematic error. Systematic error from nonresponse is a function of both the number of nonrespondents and

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the degree to which those who cannot be contacted or refuse to be interviewed differ in traits or attitudes from those who are successfully contacted and interviewed. Researchers often focus too much on the total number of nonrespondents and less on the degree to which nonrespondents are likely to differ from those sampling units who are successfully contacted and interviewed. Survey estimates of population parameters can be robust even with high levels of nonresponse if the traits and attitudes of nonrespondents differ little from the traits and attitudes of respondents. A major problem in survey research targeted at the mass public is that researchers often know little or nothing about the characteristics and attitudes of those whom they fail to contact or interview. As I will note later in this essay, elite interviewers actually have an advantage in this area because they typically know more about the characteristics and attitudes of their nonrespondents.

The first step is identifying the research question and your target population. In other words, you need to decide which doors you need to get in and why. "Who or what are you trying to generalize about?" The next step is to list a sampling frame. In a perfect world, the sampling frame would be identical to the target population. At the very least, it should be a representative sample of the target population. In some cases, figuring out the target population and coming up with a sampling frame is not a particularly difficult task. Although it was surely difficult to schedule interviews with Supreme Court justices, defining the target population was not the major hurdle for H.W. Perry (1994). Similarly, if one wanted to interview district court, circuit court, state, or local judges, or even lawyers involved in cases, widely available, easily accessible lists and databases would reveal the relevant players. If the

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unit of analysis for the study is a member of Congress or state legislator, lists of elected officials and their contact information are readily available. The work of Richard Fenno (1978) and John Kingdon (1989) stands out as some of the best in elite interviewing and they are among our discipline's most skilled practitioners at the craft. Still, the one part of their work that was not difficult was devising a sampling frame of members of Congress. Although it may be difficult to actually schedule an interview with legislators, knowing who they are and devising a sampling frame is relatively easy. With other projects, however, it is not so easy to define a sampling frame.

In my work on the targeting decisions of lobbyists in grassroots campaigns, there was obviously no easily to accessible list of all the tactical and strategic decisions made by lobbyists employing this particular tactic. Because lobbying disclosure laws do not require groups to report this tactic, there was no list available of groups that had even used it. I built a primary sampling frame by carefully following news coverage of lobbying activities in *the New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, and *the Wall Street Journal*, as well as inside the beltway publications such as *The National Journal*, *Congressional Quarterly*, and *Hotline*. I noted every instance in which an ideological group, union, corporation, or trade association was mentioned as using grassroots district-based tactics over a particular period of time. This list became the sampling frame from which I sampled 80 groups to interview (Goldstein 1999). Decisions on grassroots campaigns and lobbying choices—not the groups themselves—were the unit of analysis that interested me. Accordingly, in my interviews, I asked my respondents to name recent legislation in which they employed grassroots or constituency-based lobbying tactics. I then asked them specific questions about the tactical and strategic choices they made in each of these lobbying campaigns.¹

In their important and continuing project on lobbying, Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, and Leech want to analyze public policy issues as their basic unit of analysis. There are, of course, a limitless number of issues that are in play and no simple easy-to-access list of policy issues. Accordingly, Baumgartner and his collaborators also pursued a multistage sampling design. They first turned to a sample of organizational representatives to identify a set of issues. The sampling frame for these representatives was a database of lobbying reports that were filed in the Senate. Lobbying firms and other organizations were required to list the broad policy issues on which they were active. In the sampling frame, Baumgartner et al., listed an organization each time they reported working on a distinct issue. They then took a sample of organizations from this sampling frame and attempted to contact the staffer in charge of Congressional Relations or Government Affairs. This staffer was then asked to identify the most recent issue that he or she worked on. It was in this way that the scholars in charge of the Advocacy and Public Policy making project chose their sample of issues. Although they gathered and are gathering more extensive information on each of these issues, the interview also provided

crucial information on the major players and provided clues on where the researchers should look for additional intelligence. (See <http://lobby.la.psu.edu/> for results of the project, an extensive description of the methodology, and a list of working papers.)

In the two preceding examples, once the sampling frame was built, sampling was a relatively straightforward exercise. Of course, picking a good sample is of little use if you cannot get your sample units to speak with you. So, how do you get in the door? In survey research, there have been scores of studies systematically experimenting with different ways of increasing response rates. I am aware of no such systematic work with elite interviewing. I base the following suggestions on my own experiences as well as conversations with colleagues who have also done elite interviewing. I also include impressions from friends who have been the targets of scholarly interviewers. This topic, though, clearly deserves more systematic research.

The bottom line is that there are no silver bullet solutions, and scheduling and completing elite interviews takes a fair bit of luck. Still, there are things you can do to create your own luck. First, it is very important to send advance letters on some sort of official (usually department) stationary. The letter should clearly spell out the basic outlines of your research and be clear about the amount of time you are requesting. Be sure to provide phone, fax, and email contacts. Graduate students should put also put their advisor's name and contact information on the letter.

The letter should also be clear about what the ground rules for the interview will be. How will the information gathered in the interview be used? How will it be reported and where will it appear? Is the interview completely on the record? Will particular responses or reported behaviors be attributed to particular respondents or organizations. Will information gained in the interview only be released in aggregate or summary form? What steps will be taken to keep sensitive information confidential? Outlining and understanding the ground rules is not only crucial for getting the interview in the short run, but crucial for continuing our discipline's ability to conduct such research in the future.

Most elite respondents will be familiar with the common journalistic rules for use of information gathered in interviews settings. Obviously then, researchers need to be familiar with these rules as well. Most everyone thinks they understand the terms "on the record" or "off the record." The meaning of "on the record" is clear cut. The information can be used in any form the researcher desires and the comments or actions of the individual or group can be attributed by name. The term "off the record," however, is often misunderstood and is often confused with "not for attribution" or "on background." Technically, "off the record" means that you don't know what you were just told. You cannot use the information in any way, shape, or form. You cannot use it in an unattributed quote or even to inform your work. The term "on background" means that you can use the information to inform your own work and you can use the information as a clue to search for corroborating information or for organizations or individuals who will go on the record. "Not for attribution" means that the comments or information can be used and quoted as long as the organization or individual giving out the information is not directly identified as the source of the information or quote. My experience is that interviewees will often give all four sorts of comments in a single interview.

For inside-the-beltway interviewing, I firmly believe in "being there." Now, obviously one has to be in Washington to conduct the actual interview, but I think a sustained time period "in country" is key to making connections and being able to set up interviews. Elites will often have last minute breaks in their schedules and being on the ground and ready to conduct the interview at a moment's notice is a huge advantage. Furthermore,

Washington, DC is really a small town when it comes to politics and the more time one spends there, the more likely it is that one will make connections that can help one schedule an interview. Using connections, friends, relatives, friends of friends, friends of friends, has its advantages and disadvantages. Join a softball team (really, I'm serious!)

Researchers need to be careful about straying from their target sample or using connections to get only one set of interviews. Still, with all the difficulties involved in scheduling elite interviews, I think it would be foolish not to take advantage of any points of access that one has.

If one has done a good job at devising a sampling frame and drawing a sample, one will be able to determine if this reliance on connections is leading to an unbalanced set of interviews.

Whether you are on the ground in Washington for only a couple days or for a more extended block of time, it is crucial to take advantage of some easy and relatively inexpensive logistical support. A cell phone with voice mail is a must (remember to turn it off during the actual interview) for scheduling appointments and making sure that you are always reachable when in Washington. Leave a simple professional message. If you are using your home phone as a contact number before your trip, make sure the message is simple and professional. If you are staying with friends and leave their number, make sure that their message is relatively tame. (I learned this lesson the hard way.)

Also, make sure that you are able to check your email via a web-based program. With most university systems, it is possible to set up an account to check your email via the web. If your institution does not have such a system in place, use of one of the myriad number of free web-based email services that are available (Excite, Hotmail, or Yahoo for example.)

Good preparation does not only lead to good data for a particular interview, but credibility for future interviews for your project and colleagues' projects. In many instances, I have had my interviewees offer to help set up or gain access to other people and organizations on my target list.² If you have established a good rapport with a particular respondent, do not be shy about enlisting their help in getting in the door with others on your sample list. This is often called snowball sampling.

When all is said and done, no matter how good a job you do and how lucky you are, you will not be able to interview a portion of your target sample. What then are the consequences of nonresponse in elite interviewing? The answer to this question largely depends on the goals of your interviewing. If your goal is to gather particular factual information or to inform

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your work and write with a little real color, then confirming that you heard from different sides and different types of organizations can confirm that you do not have unbalanced or biased information.

Even when the goal is more broad generalization, this is actually an area where small N elite interviewers have an advantage over researchers doing surveys of the mass public. As noted above, nonresponse bias is a function of both the proportion of potential respondents or sampling units questioned and the degree to which those who are not contacted or refuse to be interviewed differ from those who were successfully contacted and interviewed. Unlike those doing survey research of the mass public, researchers using elite interviews actually know quite a bit about those who remain uninterviewed.

For example, if members of Congress are the target sample, an interviewer knows a lot about even those members who cannot be contacted or refuse to be interviewed. The researcher would know the member of Congress' party, state,

incumbency status, type of district (rural, urban, suburban), and past voting behavior. Such information can be crucial in determining whether there is a bias in the data. Similarly, one knows much about the past decisions of federal judges and the president who nominated them. If organizations are the target sample, a researcher can discover much about the ideological bent, areas of interest, membership, budget, size, and previous jobs of staff for just about any corporation, union, ideological group, or law firm in Washington. Although one still will not have information on unobserved or unanswered questions from the interview protocol, such observed variables can provide a clue as to whether bias exists.

Following the suggestions I outline in this essay will not guarantee that you get in the door. Given my experience and the experience of others, however, they should help. Understanding how sampling and nonresponse fit into the overall elite interviewing research mode should also help researchers evaluate the useability and generalizability of the information they gather.

Notes

1. Admittedly, even without bias from nonresponse (41 organizations agreed to speak with me about 94 different lobbying campaigns), the way I built the sampling frame created a bias in favor of large and resource rich groups and high profile issues.

2. As a small editorial aside, I think, our discipline's access to elites in Washington, especially members of Congress has been hurt by massive amounts of poorly trained students and scholars being unprepared for interviews.

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