

Heads or Tails? **Identifying Reticent Survey Respondents**

Measuring corruption, and identifying the values that underlie it, is essential to improving governance. But corruption is a highly sensitive topic, so many survey respondents are “reticent” — they prefer to give incomplete or non-truthful responses.

The IRIS Center has developed an innovative way to mitigate the effect of reticence. A standard survey technique to encourage candor — the technique of *randomized responses* — is to blend “filler” questions on non-sensitive topics with questions on a sensitive topic. Then, when analyzing the results, the filler responses are disregarded.

But IRIS does exactly the opposite, using the filler responses to estimate respondents’ overall degree of reticence. The underlying question thus shifted from “How can we get people to tell the truth?” to “How can we identify people who are lying and remove them from the data?”

The technique works like this: A respondent is asked to read a series of sensitive questions — questions not related to the topic of corruption — and to toss a coin each time. He alone sees the result of the coin toss. He is then instructed to answer “yes” either (1) as an affirmative response to the question, or (2) to indicate that the coin toss returned heads. Otherwise, he answers “no.” A “no” response should occur only in the case that the respondent had no experience of the sensitive topic, and the coin toss returned “tails.” If the respondent says “no” seven times in a row, he is classified as reticent, because it is very unlikely that the respondent would have tossed seven tails in a row.

Pilot Survey Revealed that Many Respondents Were Reticent

To test this approach, IRIS conducted a pilot survey with more than 500 Romanian entrepreneurs. IRIS classified 10 percent of respondents as reticent with near certainty, and estimated that roughly 40 percent of the respondents were actually reticent. Reticent respondents were

- ❑ Significantly less likely to report participation in corrupt interactions
- ❑ Much more likely to state that there is no corruption in their locality (even for questions that didn’t relate to their own behavior)
- ❑ More likely to state that it is impermissible to break socially beneficial rules — including the rule on not telling lies

Reticence Influences Policy Decisions

The results of comparative research on corruption, both across countries and across time periods, has significant implications for foreign assistance decisions, such as the allocation of Millennium Challenge Account funds. An explicit consideration of reticence will allow for more informed decisions.

For example, in Romania IRIS found that the level of reticence was related to the colonial heritage of the respondent’s region. This suggests that researchers should be cautious in making cross-country comparisons of corruption and values using standard survey data. IRIS also found that older respondents were more likely to be reticent, which means that even if corruption is actually falling, there may be an increase in corruption *reports* as younger, less reticent, entrepreneurs enter the market. This suggests that caution is needed when comparing survey results from different years (lest an increase in candid answers be misinterpreted as an increase in corruption). Collecting data on reticence, using the techniques developed by IRIS, would allow for correcting the data, and making more accurate assessments of changes in corruption.

IRIS’s technique can be used in other areas of sensitive data collection, such as drug addiction, crime, and public health. A more accurate approach to collecting and interpreting data can substantially improve the information available to policy-makers.