

# The effect of the elapsed time between the initial refusal and conversion contact on conversion success: evidence from the 2nd round of the European social survey

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**Abstract** The hold period between the initial refusal and the follow-up conversion attempt may be used as a strategic tool to improve conversion rates. We argue that longer hold periods result in better conversion rates, particularly among hard-to-convert refusals. In this article we will first investigate to what extent and in which manner survey authorities exert this elapsed time as an active survey instrument. Contact sheet data show that different national survey coordinators deploy different strategies with regard to this hold period. In the Netherlands, intentional survey tactics can be disentangled, whereas Swiss contact data show that the length of the hold period is a mere result other fieldwork conditions. Actual conversion success seems to be consistently dependent upon the hold period between the initial refusal and the follow-up contact.

**Keywords** Refusal conversion · Elapsed time · Hold period · European Social Survey · Contact sheet data · Survey nonresponse · Fieldwork strategy

## 1 Introduction

Refusal conversion is a strategy that is recommended to the participating countries in the European Social Survey (ESS). This technique consists of reissuing initially reluctant sample units. Some time after the initial refusal, a (new) interviewer re-approaches the prospective respondent and tries to achieve cooperation. The conversion of refusals may be advisable in order to enhance response rates on the one hand or to detect traces of nonresponse bias that is attributable to noncooperation on the other hand. Since refusals are often 'soft refusals' and

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therefore influenced by the circumstances and the mood of the potential respondent at the time of the first participation request, refusal conversion attempts can be reasonably successful (Billiet et al. 2007; Loosveldt et al. 2004). Rejection of a survey request is consequently not a permanent state. It is however unclear under which conditions refusal conversion achieves optimal results. Survey authorities dispose of some tools that possibly affect the conversion outcomes: systematic selection of (the most promising) refusals, incentives, the elapsed time between the initial refusal and the conversion attempt and finally the employable interviewer staff. This contribution seeks to examine the effect of the elapsed time between the initial refusal and the first conversion contact on the conversion success. Also, the conditions under which this hold period operates will be examined.

First, an overview will be given of previous research with regard to this topic. Then, the ESS data will be briefly presented. Thereafter, some insight will be provided to what extent the elapsed time is constrained by other fieldwork tools and circumstances such as the approaching fieldwork deadlines, the deployment of new interviewers or prior knowledge about the reluctant sample unit. Finally, the effect of the elapsed time on conversion success will be estimated.

## 2 Literature overview

Relative to its response rates, refusal conversion is perceived as rather expensive. It is therefore obvious that researchers have been looking for the optimal circumstances in which conversion attempts result in a fair return on investment. Several studies have tried to understand the factors that explain variation in success rates of refusal conversion attempts. Determinants originate both from the side of the sample units (e.g. reasons for refusals, refusal by target person versus informant refusal) as well as from the side of the implementation of survey tools: incentives, cooling-off period between initial refusal and reattempt and the choice for a new interviewer to conduct the conversion attempt (Fuse and Xie 2007; Groves et al. 1999; Kropf et al. 1999; Stoop 2005). Switching interviewers is considered as a helpful tool to stimulate survey cooperation (Groves and Couper 1998, p. 291). The underlying assumption is that new interviewers can more easily refer to a previous refusal in which they did not take part themselves. This permits to ask refusals what their particular concerns are towards survey cooperation and allows to tailor survey participation to the respondents' state of affairs. Thereby, Groves and Couper implicitly assume the new interviewer to be a more experienced or simply a better one. Some research has already been carried out to understand the effect of the time between the refusal and conversion attempt on the success rate (Triplett et al. 2001; Triplett 2002; Groves and Couper 1998). Researchers thereby seem to acknowledge the importance of timing as an instrument to succeed in fieldwork operations. The *Survey Research Center* of the University of Maryland investigated in a telephone survey between Spring 1995 and Summer 2000 the conversion success of different amounts of elapsed time between the initial refusal and the first conversion attempt. Triplett found that the conversion rates were worse during the first 6 days after the original refusal. After waiting 7 days, the success rate of converting refusals is fairly stable. There seems to be a peak in conversion success immediately after one week with respect to refusals by an informant or proxy. About 9 days after the initial refusal, the success rate among target refusals also peaks. Edwards et al. (2004), however, found no relation at all between the length of the hold period after an initial refusal for an RDD screening interview and the success of conversion follow-up. These findings pertain exclusively to telephone surveys, in which refusal conversion is more frequently used.