Survey Application Guidelines

Updated November 2022

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Overview

CivicPulse is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization that runs surveys of public officials in the United States. Our mission is to generate insights about the public sector through better access to reliable data and research. We work with researchers and organizations across an array of academic disciplines and professional domains.

CivicPulse offers the ability to conduct custom surveys of elected policymakers, top appointed executives, and key department heads in local government. We also offer surveys of civil service staff across a range of departments in local and state government, as well as the federal government on a case-by-case basis.

In addition, we conduct a national omnibus survey of local policymakers once a year by pairing modules from different researchers together to provide a lower-cost option for researchers.

Survey Options and Pricing

Custom Surveys

At CivicPulse, we define a "respondent type" by the combination of their level of government, role, and department. Table 1 displays 35 different respondent types we now offer for custom surveys (with more to come!).

Table 1. Available respondent types for CivicPulse custom surveys.

Level of government	Role	Department	Maximum sample size	Scarcity level
Local	Policymaker	NA	500	2
Local	Top Appointed Executive	NA	200	1
Local	Department Head	Communications	200	1
		Finance	200	1
		HR	200	1
		Planning/Zoning	200	1
		Police	200	1
		Buildings	100	1
		Economic Dev.	100	1
		Facilities	100	1
		Fire	100	1
		Parks & Rec	100	1
		Public Works	100	1
		Purchasing	100	1
		Water Supply	100	1

		All Departments	500	3
		Public Works	400	2
		Family/Support	200	2
		Finance	200	2
		Health	200	2
Local	Civil Service Staff	Housing	200	2
		HR	200	2
		Law	200	2
		Arts and Events	100	2
		Emergency	100	2
		Environment	100	2
		Transportation	100	2
		All Departments	500	3
		Family/Support	200	2
		Health	200	2
State	Civil Service Staff	Environment	100	2
		Finance	100	2
		HR	100	2
		Public Works	100	2
		Transportation	100	2

Pricing for custom surveys is composed of a "base price" and a "marginal price" (which is multiplied by the number of respondents). The base price is the same for all respondent types, reflecting the fixed effort required by our staff to ensure each survey is developed and executed effectively. The current base price is $5,000.

Custom Survey Price* = $5000 + *Marginal price* x *Number of respondents

The marginal price depends on two factors: (a) the level of scarcity of the sampling frame and (b) the expected survey length. In the last column of Table 1, we assign each respondent type to one of three possible scarcity levels. In Table 2, we display four marginal price options—for 3, 5, 7, and 10 minutes in survey length—for each level of scarcity.

Table 2. Marginal pricing ($/respondent) for custom surveys based on scarcity level and expected survey length.

	3 min	5 min	7 min	10 min
Level 1	21	30	39	54
Level 2	14	20	26	36
Level 3	7	10	13	18

Researchers may propose additional customizations of the sampling frame. For example, some researchers in the past have requested that respondents only represent local governments above a certain population size, or in a particular region of the country. Based on the difficulty of achieving the requested customization, CivicPulse will assess feasibility and, if feasible, provide a maximum sample size and a pricing quote.

2023 Omnibus Survey

Pricing for the 2023 national omnibus survey of local policymakers is provided in Table 3. We limit the number of options for the omnibus survey to make it easier to pair researchers' modules together on the same questionnaire.

Table 3. Four pricing options for 2023 Omnibus National Survey of Local Policymakers.

	N = 200	N = 500
2 minutes	$2000	$5000
4 minutes	$3000	$7500

Restricted Access Dataset

CivicPulse also offers the service of a Restricted Access Dataset (RAD) for researchers to have access to identifiable government and jurisdictional information (e.g., government name, Census ID, and additional community characteristics), subject to a data sharing agreement that prohibits the researcher from publicly posting the RAD or any information that could identify a specific department or government publicly. CivicPulse provides the RAD service for $600 for a custom survey project, and $500 for an omnibus survey project.

How To Apply

Because of the specialized challenges associated with conducting an effective survey with public officials, we encourage interested researchers to communicate with us early on in their project development process. You can do so by writing directly to our Managing Director, Nathan Lee, at nathanlee@civicpulse.org. Inquiries about projects in any stage of development are welcome.

Custom Surveys

Custom surveys are accepted and fielded on a rolling basis. A custom survey can take between two and four months from the initial inquiry to data delivery, though the amount of time varies by project.

A common timeline for a custom survey is as follows:

- **Month 1**
    - o Researcher reaches out to CivicPulse with preliminary idea.
    - o Researcher and CivicPulse iterate to identify optimal sampling strategy and questionnaire design for research project.

- o Researcher submits for IRB once questionnaire decided.
- o Researcher initiates payment once time estimation decided.
- o CivicPulse programs survey and shares link with researcher for review.

- **Month 2**
  - o CivicPulse completes pilot data collection.
  - o CivicPulse follows up with researchers if changes are needed.
  - o CivicPulse initiates full data collection.

- **Month 3**
  - o CivicPulse completes full data collection.
  - o CivicPulse completes data anonymization and delivery (with reference guide) to researcher.

2023 Omnibus Survey

The process for the 2023 National Omnibus Survey of Local Policymakers is more standardized. Interested researchers must apply by January 15th, 2023. The application consists of three parts:

- Preliminary questionnaire (.docx)
- Preliminary time estimation (.xlsx)
- Cover letter outlining your research question, a brief summary of your questionnaire, and any additional comments or questions you may have

You can submit your application directly to our Managing Director, Nathan Lee, at nathanlee@civicpulse.org. If you have questions prior to the deadline, do not hesitate to reach out.

Below is an overview of the subsequent process.

- o **Jan 15 - Feb 15.**
  - ▪ CivicPulse reviews researchers' proposals.
- o **Feb 15 - March 15.**
  - ▪ CivicPulse goes back-and-forth with researchers to revise questionnaires as needed and agree on time estimation.
  - ▪ Researchers submit for IRB once questionnaire decided.
  - ▪ Researchers initiate payment once time estimation decided.
- o **March 15 – April 1.**
  - ▪ CivicPulse programs survey and shares test link for review with all researchers.
- o **April 1 – April 15.**
  - ▪ Pilot data collection.
  - ▪ CivicPulse follows up with researchers as needed in case changes are needed to reduce attrition.
- o **April 1 – June 1.** Full data collection.

- o **June 1 – June 15.** Data anonymization and delivery (with reference guide) to researchers.

Developing Your Questionnaire

General Guidelines

Unlike most public opinion surveys—where respondents are incentivized to complete the survey no matter how it is designed—our surveys rely on public officials who voluntarily answer questions because they believe it is serving the public good. As such, content on CivicPulse surveys must be engaging and easy to comprehend. Our team will work with you to minimize survey drop-off.

Here we offer four general considerations to keep in mind before moving on to more specific guidelines for developing your questionnaire.

- First, please make sure to use plain, clear English (rather than Academic or Industry English!).

- Second, CivicPulse respondents represent a wide range of communities, including many small, more rural communities. Sometimes researchers may not be aware of this and make their content too "big city" centric, leading some respondents to feel the survey is not for them and drop off.

- Third, keep in mind is that a significant portion of our respondents complete surveys on their mobile phones. Please make sure to keep in mind how the content will display on mobile.

- Fourth and finally, some types of content are explicitly prohibited. Specifically, we ask researchers to avoid the following:
  - o Overly complex tasks or questions
  - o Deception or any misleading language (explicit hypotheticals ok)
  - o Content designed to change behavior

Ok, onto more specific guidelines!

Questionnaire template

CivicPulse provides a questionnaire template (Microsoft Word document) that we ask you to use in developing your questionnaire.

Programming instructions

Questionnaire-wide programming instructions are included at the beginning of the template. You can adjust these default instructions to fit the needs of your

questionnaire. Section-specific programming should be provided below the section title (an example is provided in the template).

As a policy, we do not force respondents to give a response. We do, however, "request" response by default for all questions except for open-ended questions.

Item types

The permissible item types and their abbreviations are provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Guidelines for permissible item types for CivicPulse questionnaires.

Item Type	Abbreviation	Word Limit	Additional Guidelines
Multiple Choice	MC	40	
Multiple Selection	MS	60	
Short Open-ended	SO	30	Expected 3-5 word response
Long Open-ended	LO	40	Expected 2-3 sentence response
Grid	GR	100	Up to five rows
Text	TE	40	
		80	
		120	
		160	
Slider	SL	40	
Dropdown	DD	60	
Image	IM	NA	
Table	TA	40	
Ranking	Prohibited		
Numeric Fill-in	Prohibited		

We prohibit ranking questions because they can be onerous and force respondents to state a preference ordering, which can lead to frustration. Instead, we encourage researchers to ask the same question for each item within a grid.

We also prohibit the use of numeric fill-in boxes that ask for precise numbers. These types of questions contribute to survey drop off, as some respondents will not know how to respond and feel hesitant to guess. Instead, we encourage researchers to ask a closed-ended question in which the response options are limited and binned, such as 0 to 100, 101 to 1000, etc.

Item naming

Organize your questionnaire by sections such that all items fall within one of them. Give each section a short name that meaningfully captures the topic of that part of the survey.

Each item name should then use this section name as a prefix with two subsequent components: a key word that maps to that specific item and the item type abbreviation. The combination of these three components should uniquely identify each item but contain no more than 20 characters (see below).

> *Section name* + '_' + *item key word* + '_' + *item type abbreviation.*

For items associated with individual rows within a grid item, each name should have an additional key word (see below). For these item names only, it is permissible to exceed the 20-character limit.

> *Section name* + '_' + *grid item key word* + '_' + 'GR' + '_' + *row item key word*

Introduction section (opening, consent, and warm-up items)

The first section should be called "Introduction" and starts off with a text item to introduce the content of the questionnaire and how it connects to local government ("Introduction_opening_TE"). CivicPulse will compose this item for each survey, and it does not count toward your time.

Following the opening, we ask researchers to include a couple of easier-to answer "warm-up" items so respondents can ease into the content (typically but not always multiple-choice questions). Beginning with a cognitively taxing exercise can lead to higher survey attrition.

Section preambles

Each subsequent section should typically begin with a text preamble (e.g., "*SectionName*_preamble_TE") to smooth the transition between sections and preview the next set of items.

Page breaks

Please be thoughtful about page breaks. We suggest including 2 to 6 items per page, but whatever feels appropriate so as to minimize the number of pages while not having any page be overwhelming. Each section can be one page or multiple pages, as appropriate.

Required open-ended item

We require including at least one open-ended item per survey (or module, in the case of an omnibus survey). CivicPulse survey participants are highly opinionated and often don't like being "boxed in" to close-ended responses. An open-ended response allows them to expand on their answers before moving onto other content and reduces the likelihood of drop-off. The majority of officials will substantively answer open-ended questions, and the responses can also be quite useful.

Respondent Demographics

All researchers will receive additional pre-coded information about the characteristics of the community associated with each respondent. These include government type, state, Census region, the proportion of the community that is college-educated, the population size of the community, and the presidential vote share of the associated county.

Other respondent demographics are not pre-coded. Researchers should include any additional respondent demographic items as part of their questionnaire, unless they are part of the annual omnibus survey (in which case the content is complimentary). Below are the items that are part of the omnibus survey. They are also listed on the questionnaire template, so a custom researcher can incorporate any or all of the item into their own questionnaire.

> **Ideology.** In general, do you think of yourself as: {Very conservative, Somewhat conservative, Moderate, Middle of the road, Somewhat liberal, Very liberal, Not sure}
>
> **Party**. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a: {Democrat, Republican, Independent, Other party (Please specify.)}
>
> **Party_indep** *(if Party== "Independent" or "Other").* Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party? {Democratic Party, Republican Party, Neither}
>
> **Gender.** What is your gender? {Man, Woman, Prefer to self-describe (*Conditional display short text box)*}
>
> **Age.** When were you born? {*5-yr interval dropdown*}
>
> **Education.** What is the highest level of education you have completed? {Less than high school, High school graduate, Technical/trade school, Some college, College graduate, Some graduate school, Graduate degree}
>
> **Ethnicity_race.** Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity? Please check all that apply. {White, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, Middle Eastern, Mixed Race, Prefer to self-describe (*Conditional display of short text box)*}

Politically controversial content

CivicPulse is a nonpartisan organization, but we recognize that research on politically controversial content is important. While we accept proposals on such content, we do require contributors minimize the potential for annoyance, anger, and survey drop-off. CivicPulse recommends a few strategies to mitigate common problems related to controversial content. Employing these strategies will bolster response rates and preserve the sample for future studies.

If any controversial content is proposed, CivicPulse asks that contributors incorporate one or more of the following mitigation strategies:

1. **Preambles**. Use language in a preamble to let the reader know explicitly that CivicPulse understands there are ranging views on the topic and that we are not looking for a particular answer.

2. **Open ended questions**. Allow respondents to express more nuanced views or "vent" any frustration in an open-ended question immediately following the controversial content.
3. **Neutral language**. Avoid leading questions or language that implies a political bias on the topic.
4. **Balanced selection of issues.** If you are particularly interested in a topic that might be controversial for one party but not the other (e.g., climate change, firearm regulations), include questions on an additional less controversial topic, or questions on a topic perceived as controversial for the *other* party. Aim for a survey experience that is balanced by partisanship.

Fact-finding questions

A valid use of a CivicPulse survey is to acquire factual information about local governments. To that end, researchers should limit information-gathering questions to topics that their target respondents have some knowledge about. Avoid questions that would require the respondent to stop the survey to look something up. Such questions will contribute to survey drop off and lower response rates.

Hypotheticals

Researchers often wish to elicit the opinion of survey participants based on a range of hypothetical scenarios, whether they are presented in vignette or table form. Hypotheticals are acceptable, but they must be grounded in a context that is both plausible and relevant to the jobs or lives of our survey participants, and should not be excessively complex or difficult to understand. Long blocks of text or expansive tables that are tedious and difficult to read will not be accepted.

Conjoint experiments

Conjoint experiments can often be unpleasant and boring to complete. CivicPulse will accept conjoint experiments only if the tables or vignettes are thoughtfully constructed in a way that is relatable and feels reasonable from the standpoint of the respondent (see previous section on "Hypotheticals"). Repetitive tasks are discouraged, but we will allow up to four tasks per conjoint if it is well-designed. For paired-choice conjoints, we strongly encourage not forcing a binary choice but instead allowing for Likert scoring of each choice.

Time Estimation

CivicPulse provides a time estimation template (.xlsx file) to give researchers the ability to estimate their own questionnaires. The general approach we employ is to assign a base score (number of seconds) for each item based on its item type (see Tabe 5).

The base scores are approximations. After you submit your time estimation to us, we will conduct an internal time estimation review in which we will benchmark your items

against timing data for similar items from the past and make adjustments as needed. We'll then provide it back to you for final review.

Table 5. Base score by item type for time estimation of a CivicPulse survey.

Item Type	Word Limit	Base Score (seconds)
Multiple Choice (MC)	40	10
Multiple Selection (MS)	60	20
Short Open-ended (SO)	30	20
Long Open-ended (LO)	40	40
Grid (GR)	100	40
Text (TE)	40	10
	80	20
	120	30
	160	40
Slider (SL)	40	10
Dropdown (DD)	60	20
Image (IM)	NA	30
Table (TA)	40	30

To complete the time estimation template, you must assess each item in the questionnaire separately. For each item, follow these four steps:

1. Fill in the item name (Column A).
2. Select the item type (Column B). This should cause a base score (Column C), word limit (Column D).
3. Calculate the word count for each item and insert the value (Column E).
   a. The word count you insert will not change the score; it is just to make sure your item meets the word limit.
   b. If an item does not fit the corresponding word limit, please provide an explanation (Column F), and we will review on a case-by-case basis.
4. Select the conditional display likelihood (Column G).
   a. For a conventional survey, most items will be marked '1'.
   b. If the correct likelihood should instead be less than 1, choose one of the three alternative values (0.25, 0.5, and 0.75) that best fits your case.
   c. Any value less than '1' requires an explanation (Column H). Possible explanations may be that display is conditional on an embedded field or that the item is only displayed based on a particular response to a previous item.
5.

The total time is displayed in Columns J-K.

Additional Information

Funding and Payment

We do not require proof of funding to apply for either a custom survey or a module on the omnibus survey. Once your application is accepted and your survey questionnaire is finalized, we will ask you to sign a Statement of Work.

Once you have reviewed the Statement of Work and signed it, we will send it back to you countersigned along with an invoice with instructions for payment. Please note that payment must be made prior to survey launch. If you anticipate any issues with funding or the payment timeline, please let us know ASAP. In particular, you may be required to establish CivicPulse as a vendor at your university or organization. If that requires additional paperwork on our end, let us know.

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

CivicPulse is a 501c(3) outside the purview of any particular university's IRB jurisdiction. As such, it is your own responsibility to get the questionnaire approved by your institution's IRB, if relevant. The questionnaire template provides our standard survey introduction language at the top of the document.

It is significantly shorter than the typical "consent language" used for many public opinion surveys. We strive to maintain a short survey introduction to reduce survey attrition, given that our survey respondents are government officials volunteering their very limited time. However, if modifications are required, please let us know and we will work closely with you to ensure the survey introduction complies with both CivicPulse's operational requirements and your IRB's research ethics guidelines.

Post-survey research brief

As a mission-driven nonprofit, we aim to both facilitate frontier research while also generating useful insights for the community that we are surveying. To that end, we are committed to following up within three months of closing the survey to the government community with some brief insights from each survey we conduct. We typically do this by writing up a short research brief based on a few items from your survey (pre-approved by you) that might be interesting to the local government community while also ensuring you don't have to worry about being "scooped." Rest assured: this does not mean more work for you. We are happy to write the research briefs ourselves and run them by you. That said, if you wish to work more closely with us, we would be happy to collaborate and coauthor them.