Survey Application Guidelines

Updated March 2022

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Introduction

Our Approach

Thank you for your interest in working with CivicPulse! CivicPulse is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization that runs a national survey platform of local government officials. Our mission is to generate insights about local government through shared data and research. We accept applications from researchers interested in fielding surveys of local government officials.

Because of the specialized challenges associated with conducting an effective survey with sitting local government officials, *we encourage prospective applicants to communicate with us early and often*. Even if your project idea is still in development, do not hesitate to reach out to us. You can do so by filling out this Expression of Interest form.

Overview of the Two Options

At present, CivicPulse offers two options to researchers interested in surveying local government officials. Researchers can apply to conduct a stand-alone **custom survey** of any of the local government positions in our panel, or to propose content to include in our a**nnual omnibus survey** administered to local policymakers only.

- **Custom Surveys** offer researchers the most flexibility. Researchers can choose from any of the sixteen local government positions we have in our sample. They can also limit the geographic or demographic scope of the target sample, subject to feasibility. Researchers can propose content up to ten minutes in length, including customizing respondent demographic questions. Finally, applications for custom surveys are accepted on a rolling basis and can be implemented on a faster timeframe.
- **Omnibus Surveys** pair modules from different contributors together to reduce the costs for researchers. Proposed content cannot exceed 4 minutes. Respondent demographic variables are standardized and provided to omnibus survey contributors for no additional charge. Pricing is updated regularly based on the cost of maintaining the sample and is announced in our annual Call for Proposals.

	Custom Survey	Omnibus Survey
Application Timeline	Rolling	Once a year
Position Scope	Customizable (Policymakers or any of 14 civil service positions)	Local policymakers
Government Scope	Customizable	All US muni, town, and county govs of 1000 or more people
Geographic Scope	Customizable	National
Sample Size	Up to 500 for policymakers; up to 200 for civil service positions	100, 200, 300, 400, or 500
Survey length maximum (see Time Estimation Rubric)	10 minutes (including demographics)	4 minutes (not including demographics)

Pricing Estimate	Case-by-case	See annual Call for Proposals or email info@civicpulse.org
Minimum Acceptable Cost (to justify our limited personnel time)	$4000	$1500

If you are interested in fielding a custom survey with us or proposing content for an omnibus survey, your first step is to **contact us through the [Expression of Interest](#) form.** We will reach out to you to follow up**.**

Custom Surveys

Overview

CivicPulse invites researchers interested in fielding a stand-alone custom survey to contact us through our [Expression of Interest](#) form. We offer both national and regional random-sample options. Sample size options are provided below for all fifteen of our local government leadership positions.

Sample Options

Our population of local officials represents all townships, municipalities, and counties in the United States with a population of 1,000 or more. We consider custom samples on a case-by-case basis. The maximum sample size we offer depends on the local government position and geographic scale of interest. In general, we can offer up to 500 respondents in a national sample of policymakers, and up to 200 respondents in a national sample of any of the civil service positions.

We currently survey the following local government positions.

1. Policymakers (Governing Board Members and Top Elected Officials)
2. Top Appointed Officials
3. Heads of Finance
4. Heads of Information Technology
5. Heads of Law Enforcement
6. Heads of Clerk's Office
7. Heads of Human Resources
8. Heads of Purchasing/Procurement
9. Heads of Fire Protection Services
10. Heads of Public Works
11. Head Building Officials
12. Heads of Communication
13. Heads of Water Supply
14. Heads of Parks and Recreation
15. Heads of Planning/Zoning
16. Heads of Economic Development

Questionnaire Length and Pricing

Custom surveys are limited to **no more than ten minutes** (including demographics), so that we can maintain high survey response rates. There is no minimum survey length; however, we generally only accept projects priced at a **minimum of $4,000** to ensure that we can cover the fixed costs of running a stand-alone survey. Pricing is dependent on the length of the survey and the relative difficulty of achieving the targeted sample size (i.e., the target government position and the target sample size).

More information about pricing is provided during an initial 30-min meeting between CivicPulse and the researcher.

Standard Survey Variables

Below is a summary of the standard variables included in the data delivery for a custom survey. These variables consist of three categories: (1) survey metadata, (2) constituent demographics, and (3) survey weights. **Please note that respondent demographic questions are entirely customizable and up to the custom survey applicant to include in their questionnaire.** CivicPulse can provide a standard battery of demographic questions to the custom survey applicant as a starting point. Respondent demographic questions will count toward survey length in custom surveys.

Survey Metadata

StartDate

The time and date when the survey was started.

EndDate

The time and date when the survey was completed. For respondents that did not complete the survey, this variable records the time of their last activity on the survey.

Finished

1 = Respondent completed the survey

0 = Respondent did not complete the survey

Gov_type

A variable indicating the government position of the respondent. Its values are: "county," "municipality," and "township."

State

A variable indicating which state the respondent resides in.

Constituent Demographics

To provide additional information about the constituents which respondents represent, we match respondents' geographic locations to the U.S. Census (97% match rate). Using this method, we provide four variables about respondents' constituents: the proportion of the population that is college-educated (College_prop), the proportion living in an urban area (Urban_prop, the population size (Population), and the county-level presidential vote share (Voteshare_pres_2020). **To ensure confidentiality of the respondent, each variable is binned into terciles.**

College_prop

The proportion of 25-years-or-older residents in the given geographic unit who have completed a 4-year, post-secondary degree. This data is taken from American Community Survey.

Urban_prop

The proportion of residents in the given geographic unit who reside in an urban area. This data is taken from the 2010 Census.

Population

The total number of residents living in the given geographic unit. This data is taken from the American Community Survey.

Voteshare_pres_2020

The proportion of the votes, by county, for Joe Biden in the 2020 Presidential election.
Note: Each sub-county government is matched to the relevant county in which it is contained.

Survey Weights

Unlike with surveys of the U.S. mass public – which rely on Census demographic data about the aggregate U.S. population to generate weights – we do not have demographic data about the aggregate population of local government officials (with the exception of gender, which we can code based on first names). However, we can mitigate some of the possible survey sample bias by reweighting based on the demographics of *constituent areas.* To this end, we employ a conventional post-stratification raking procedure using the Census variables listed in the previous section. We follow the methodology outlined in DeBell and Krosnick (2009) for the American National Election Study (ANES).[1]

How to Apply

Steps

1. Submit an Expression of Interest form.
2. Review Survey Application Guidelines (this document) and FAQs.
3. Brief virtual consultation with CivicPulse team member.
4. Use CivicPulse Survey Template to format your questionnaire.

Details

Please submit initial inquiries for custom surveys through our Expression of Interest form. Include any relevant details you have about your intended proposal, and our team will respond promptly with feasibility and next steps.

Omnibus Surveys

Overview

Once a year, CivicPulse sends out a Call for Proposals inviting applicants to include survey questions on an omnibus survey. Unlike the stand-alone custom surveys, omnibus surveys feature content from

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[1] https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/26b8/ab6c0dd7e50c09c6af32a3c7469b080b63af.pdf

multiple contributors. The Call for Proposals details the scope of the planned survey, along with pricing information and the deadline to receive applications.

Contributors submit proposals to add a module of questions to the omnibus survey. Once data collection is complete, contributors receive data corresponding to their module only, along with CivicPulse's standard battery of respondent demographic variables, constituent demographic variables, survey metadata, and weights.

CivicPulse fields omnibus surveys once a year. The deadline to propose content for the omnibus survey is January 15. Our Call for Proposals is sent out approximately three months prior to the deadline and includes all relevant details about the planned omnibus survey.

Sample Options

Omnibus surveys target a random sample of local government policymakers (governing board members and top elected officials) nationwide. Our population of local officials represents all townships, municipalities, and counties in the United States with a population of 1,000 or more. Applicants can choose the number of respondents corresponding to their module in increments of 100 and up to a maximum of 500 respondents.

Questionnaire Length and Pricing

Proposed modules for the omnibus survey should include content of **no more than four minutes in length** (see Time Estimation Rubric for information about how we estimate length). Price is determined based on estimated length of the module and the target sample size. For current pricing information, please email info@civicpulse.org.

If you would like to propose a longer survey, target a civil service position, or if you would like to field a survey outside the Call for Proposals timeline, please consider our Custom Survey option.

Standard Survey Variables

Below is a summary of the standard variables included in data delivery to omnibus survey contributors. These variables consist of four categories: (1) respondent demographics, (2) survey metadata, (3) constituent demographics, and (4) survey weights.

Respondent Demographics

The following demographic questions are included in all omnibus surveys and the data are provided to each omnibus survey contributor at no additional charge.

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 (Independents)

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?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer to self-describe

Age

When were you born? [Dropdown of year]

Education

What is the last grade of school you completed?

- Less than high school
- High school graduate
- Technical/trade school
- Some college
- College graduate
- Some graduate school
- Graduate degree

Ethnicity

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicano
- Yes, Puerto Rican
- Yes, Cuban
- Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

Race

Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity? Please check all that apply.

- White
- Black/African American
- Asian/Asian American (includes East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander)
- Native American
- Other (Please specify)

Survey Metadata

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How to Apply

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1. Submit an Expression of Interest form.

2. Review Survey Application Guidelines (this document) and FAQs.

3. Brief virtual consultation with CivicPulse team member.

4. Use CivicPulse Survey Template to format your questionnaire.

5. Submit your proposal (cover letter and questionnaire) to info@civicpulse.org. The subject of your email should be "CP Proposal: [Last Name], [First Name]". The file name of your submission should be "LastName_FirstName_CPproposal". Please submit your proposal as a Microsoft Word document.

Details

Expression of Interest

After considering the position and sample size options, please fill out a brief, non-binding Expression of Interest form to let us know you may be applying.

Components of a Proposal

The proposal (single-spaced, 12-pt) should include the following two items:

1) 1-page cover letter. Briefly state your research question and motivation, informal citations are okay though not required. The cover letter should also specify your target sample size.

In addition,

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[2] https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/26b8/ab6c0dd7e50c09c6af32a3c7469b080b63af.pdf

   i. If you are including an experiment, please include a justification for the experiment as well (see Content Guidelines).

   ii. If applicable, please specify if you are interested in purchasing the Restricted Access Dataset.

 2) Annotated questionnaire. This is the core of the proposal. Please use the CivicPulse Survey Template, and make sure your questionnaire includes the following three components:

   i. Clear and concise questions, annotated with question type (e.g., multiple choice – choose one).

   ii. Point values for time estimation (see Time Estimation Rubric).

   iii. Additional programming specifications or details, as appropriate. This could include embedded variables (e.g., government_level which displays "municipality," "township," or "county," depending on the respondent type), conditional display, randomization of questions, answer order, etc.

Developing Your Questionnaire

Local Government Relevance

CivicPulse strongly prefers to field content that is relevant to local governments and/or survey participants' jobs as local officials. Nevertheless, we understand that many contributors wish to ask about national-level political issues. **We are open to such content, provided that the contributor frames national-level issues as relevant to local officials.** This can sometimes be achieved with a survey or question block preamble, e.g., "while [issue] is often discussed at the national level, the local perspective is often left out."

Permissible Content

CivicPulse does not accept the following types of content in its surveys unless there is an exceptional rationale and circumstance.

1. **Deception**. Any information that is untrue or substantively misleading, or any language that misrepresents the purpose of the survey content.
2. **Intention to change behavior**. Survey questions designed to change local official behavior, such as voting or policymaking.

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.

Information-gathering questions

A valid use of a CivicPulse survey is to acquire factual information about local governments. To that end, contributors 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.

Experiments

We prefer contributions that focus on descriptive questions, but accept experiments that adhere to the following guidelines:

a. **Avoid abstract vignettes**. Experiments often use hypothetical or abstract vignettes that can seem irrelevant to the jobs of local officials. Furthermore, hypothetical scenarios sometimes appear too simplistic to local officials who prefer more detail before forming an opinion on an issue. To the extent possible, we recommend grounding the vignette in a scenario involving local government and including a preamble that connects the issue highlighted in the vignette to local government.
b. **Avoid lengthy text**. Many survey experiments rely on long blocks of text that are tedious and difficult to read. Please keep vignettes or prompts concise and clear.
c. **Avoid deception**. We do not allow deception (see "Unacceptable Content" above), but explicitly hypothetical scenarios are accepted as long as they conform to the guidelines above.

Conjoint Experiments

Conjoint experiments tend to be hypothetical, abstract, and long, and thus are especially vulnerable to the concerns raised above. Contributors seeking to propose conjoint experiments must be especially mindful of the guidelines above. In addition to the guidelines above, CivicPulse recommends a design that allows respondents to evaluate each item per pair rather than forcing an overall choice.

Permissible Question Types

In general, we ask that contributors avoid overly complex questions. Respondents are very busy public servants who may not make time for surveys very often. With that in mind, CivicPulse does have guidelines for three common complex question types.

Grids

Grids should typically have no more than 6 items (rows) and 5 answer choices (columns). Item descriptions should be kept as succinct as possible and be consistent in syntax and specificity. Be especially careful that the answer choices are also as succinct as possible so that the grid can be properly viewed on mobile devices.

Ranking questions

We generally discourage ranking questions because they can be onerous and force respondents to state a preference ordering, which can lead to frustration. Instead, we encourage contributors to ask the same question for each item within a grid. As an alternative, the contributor could consider asking respondents to choose between two options (and including a follow up open-ended question to allow the respondent space to explain the trade-offs). If, however, a ranking question is necessary, we recommend using clear and concise language, and limiting the number of items to rank.

Numeric questions

We discourage the use of numeric fill-in boxes that ask for precise numbers, particularly related to information that is difficult to obtain. These types of questions contribute to survey drop off, as some respondents will not know how to respond, feel hesitant to guess, and/or view the task as too time-consuming if they have to look up information to answer the question. Instead, contributors should ask a closed-ended question in which the response options are limited and binned, such as 0 to 100, 101 to 1000, etc.

Open-ended questions

We encourage including at least one open-ended question per module, but especially after closed-ended questions on controversial content so that survey takers can have a chance to add nuance to their answers. We have found that the majority of officials will substantively answer open-ended questions (more so than when such questions are used in public opinion surveys).

Questionnaire Organization

A clear and streamlined survey will help maximize response rates. The following guidelines help to achieve this goal.

Introduction and Block Preambles

Each contributor's module should include a brief introduction that previews the questions and connects the topic to local government. Each substantively distinct block of questions should include an additional preamble to smooth the transition and preview the next set of questions.

Questions per page

CivicPulse has no formal requirements regarding the minimum or maximum number of questions per page; however, contributors should keep in mind that pages with overwhelming content, as well as too many pages with too little content, can lead to survey drop off. "Overwhelming" pages include pages with too many questions, large blocks of text, or grids with countless rows (see more on Grids below). At the other extreme, every new page is an opportunity for respondents to take a break and set the survey

aside for later; questions spread across too many pages give the illusion of a longer survey and can contribute to survey fatigue. CivicPulse recommends aiming for 2-6 questions per page, depending on question type. Contributors should use their best judgment and keep in mind the user experience.

Question ordering

We recommend starting a module with easier-to answer questions so respondents can ease into the content. Starting a new module with a complex task can dissuade respondents from continuing the survey and contribute to survey drop off.

Forced vs request response

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.

Time Estimation Rubric

Below is a scoring rubric for estimating the expected time respondents will take to complete a set of questions. This scoring system is based on analyses of past CivicPulse surveys.

Point-to-time conversion: 1 point = 10 seconds

By Question Type

Category	Base Point Estimation	Note
Multiple choice, choose one	1 point	No more than 7 response items[3]
Multiple choice, choose multiple	1 point for every three response items	No more than 7 response items
Grid	1 point + 0.5 pts per row	No more than 5 columns; no more than 6 rows
Open-ended, single line	2 points	Intended for responses that only require a few words
Open-ended, multiple line	4 points	2-3 sentence responses[4]
Numerical response	1.5 points	
Slider	1 point	
Ranking	1 point for every two response items	

Length of Question Prompts

All categories below assume a prompt of no more than 30 words (about two sentences). Each additional 10 words (rounding up) will be scored as an additional 0.5 points.

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[3] "Other (Please specify)" adds 0.2 points.

[4] We add a standard statement after all multi-line open-ended questions that says, "Please limit your answer to 2–3 sentences." In the past, we have found this encourages a higher question completion rate - the current rate is approximately 60-70%. The 4-point score is "discounted" to reflect this partial completion rate.

Length of Answer Choices

Each answer choice is assumed to be no more than 5 words. Each additional 5 words of text (rounding up) will be scored as an additional 0.5 points.

Additional Information

Restricted Access Dataset

A CivicPulse survey contributor can request an additional dataset which contains identified data about a respondent's government. The identified dataset will include:

- Government name
- County name
- Census ID
- Non-binned Census variables

For pricing information, please visit our website. The additional cost for identified data helps cover labor costs to prepare the dataset and codebook. The Restricted Access Dataset can be purchased at any time, before or after a survey is fielded. Before the Restricted Access Dataset can be delivered, the contributor must sign a Data Security Agreement. CivicPulse will deliver the Restricted Access Dataset and Reference Guide upon payment.

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. At this point, we will generate an invoice and **request payment prior to fielding your questions**.

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Custom survey and omnibus survey applicants are responsible for obtaining IRB approval through their institution. We are happy to provide information that may be useful to your application. For example, please find a sample participant recruitment message below.

Sample invitation message for CivicPulse survey

Dear [Name],

Our mission at CivicPulse is to generate insights of and for local governments across the United States. Today we are writing you to request your participation in a [X] minute survey on [survey topics]. These questions have been developed by researchers from [University Names], and your responses will remain confidential.

[LINK: Click Here to Take the Survey]

We will follow up to provide you a report based on this survey, and hope to offer you useful insights comparing the experiences of different local governments.

Thank you for your time.

[Name] and the CivicPulse Team
--
[Position], CivicPulse

Please [LINK: Click Here] to opt out of future emails.