Survey Application Guidelines

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Table of Contents

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 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.

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 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 as a significant proportion of our respondents take surveys on their phones.

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

Item types and time estimation

The permissible item types are provided in Table 1, along with the word limit for each type. Table 1 also indicates the "base score" (number of seconds) CivicPulse typically

assigns to each item type when estimating the time a questionnaire will take to complete. These scores are based on past survey data.

The actual score for each item may be adjusted up or down from the base score depending on circumstances. A common adjustment is one where the score is adjusted down because the item is only displayed under certain respondent conditions.

Though it is not required, researchers can calculate a preliminary estimate of their own questionnaire using the CivicPulse time estimation template (.xlsx file). Alternatively, researchers can submit a questionnaire they are considering to CivicPulse, and we will provide a time estimation.

Table 1. Guidelines for permissible item types for CivicPulse questionnaires.

Item Type	Word Limit	Additional Guidelines	Base Time Estimate (sec.)
Single Choice	40		10
Multiple Selection	60		20
Short Open-ended	30	Expected 3-5 word response	20
Long Open-ended	40	Expected 2-3 sentence response	40
Grid	100	Up to five rows	40
Text	40		10
	80		20
	120		30
	160		40
Dropdown	60		20
Image	NA		30
Table	40		30
Slider	40		10
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.

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. 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., 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 items

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.

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.

Respondent demographics

Respondent demographics are not pre-coded. Researchers should include any additional respondent demographic items as part of their questionnaire. Below are the standard demographic questions that Civicpulse uses. Researchers can incorporate any or all of them 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*)}

Public access dataset (PAD)

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.

Restricted access dataset (RAD)

CivicPulse 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.

Funding and payment

Upon agreeing on the respondent type and survey length, we will provide you a Scope of Work (SOW). Once you have reviewed the SOW 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.

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 2-3 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 write the research briefs ourselves and run them by you.