

SHORT REPORT

Invitation Letters Increase Response Rates in Elite Surveys: Evidence from Germany and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

A key challenge when surveying political elites is recruitment. Low response rates can lead to biased samples and underpowered designs, threatening the validity of descriptive and experimental scholarship. In a randomized control trial, we test the effects of sending postal invitations in a large survey of local elected officials. We find that German and UK local politicians are more likely to complete the survey if invited by postal mail, rather than simply by email. Recruitment mode does not impact the quality of responses but shapes the population of local officials recruited. Officials invited via postal letter were more likely to come from smaller municipalities and less likely to have a college degree. Costs per response are relatively high but can be reduced as we learn more about selection into elite surveys.

Keywords: Political elites; surveys; response rates; incentives

There is a growing interest in the study of elite behavior in political science (Kertzer and Renshon, 2022). Scholars of political representation, party politics, and legislative politics increasingly rely on surveys of elected politicians (e.g., Pereira, 2021; Sheffer et al., 2018) and bureaucrats (e.g., Bækgaard et al., 2019; Brierley, 2020; Heinzel et al., 2025) to test underlying assumptions of existing theories or to gather new insights into the motivations, attitudes, and behavior of policymakers. Elite surveys have become more common with the blurring lines between the study of political behavior and institutions in political science, the growing interest in subnational politics, and the normalization of survey experimental designs (Butler and Pereira, 2025; Walgrave and Joly, 2018).

A key challenge of conducting surveys of political elites, as well as other hard-to-reach populations, is recruitment (Bailer, 2014; López, 2023; Maestas, Neeley, and Richardson, 2003). Quantitative surveys with political elites increasingly rely on non-incentivized online surveys including survey experiments (e.g., Butler et al., 2017;

Dynes, Hassell, and Miles, 2023; Mayne and Peters, 2023; Lee, 2022; Lucas et al., 2024; Pereira et al., 2025). Response rates in these online surveys are typically low and depend on the population targeted, the geographical scope, and the timing of fieldwork (Miller, 2022; Krause et al., 2024; Vis and Stolwijk, 2021; Walgrave and Joly, 2018). Low response rates can result in biased samples and underpowered designs, threatening the validity of descriptive and experimental scholarship. Some recent scholarship looks at how incentives in political elite surveys can impact sample sizes and survey responses (Butler and Pereira, 2018; Heinzel et al., 2025). Sending formal invitation letters has a long history in elite studies and is still an established practice when soliciting face-to-face interviews with national politicians (Walgrave and Joly, 2018). Formal letters add to the credibility of the research and this seems particularly needed in times when unsolicited emails are increasingly received with skepticism and either end up in the spam folder or Respondents don't dare click on the included link because of cybersecurity concerns (Krause et al., 2024). Finally, earlier research suggests that for mass citizen surveys formal invitation letters—together with email reminders—have proven effective in boosting response rates but the effects are modest (Porter and Whitcomb, 2007; Kaplowitz et al., 2012).

In this research note, we assess whether recruiting participants to an online survey via a postal letter increases response rates among local elected officials. We expect formal invitation letters to increase response rates through a number of complementary mechanisms. Letters signal the credibility of the research endeavor and overcome spam and security concerns specific to emails. Finally, given older generations are overrepresented in local offices, letter invitations may be more in line with the daily routine of the population studied.

Method

We embedded this study in the European Panel of Local Officials, a survey of mayors and councilors in six Western countries fielded in December 2022–February 2023. During recruitment, we randomly assigned officials in Germany and the United Kingdom to receive formal invitation letters in addition to our standard recruitment strategy via email. The letter—content-wise identical to the email—described the purpose of the study and included a URL as well as a QR code for direct access to the online survey. Finally, the letter was signed by the two project leaders and included their University affiliations.¹ See Figure A1 for an example of the letter.

Since the letters were randomly assigned, differences in response rates across groups provide causal estimates of the effects of sending invitation letters on response rates.² Randomization was performed within the country. Hence, the pooled analyses include country-fixed effects.

¹In Germany this meant that nobody was affiliated with a local University while in the United Kingdom there was a local connection.

²Table A1, in the Appendix, reports balance tests and reveals no problems in the randomization across a range of demographic and political variables.

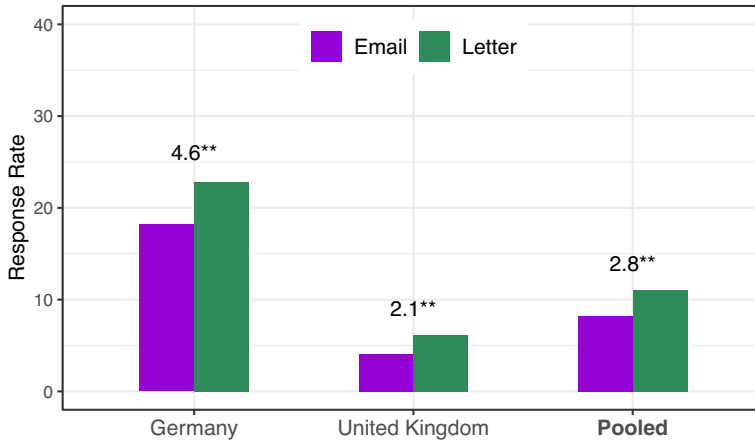


Figure 1. Response rates in local politicians' survey by recruitment model. *Note:* Bars describe response rates by randomly assigned recruitment modes in Germany, United Kingdom, and in both countries combined. Difference-in-means estimates from linear models (with country FEs in the pooled model) were reported over the bars for each group **($p < 0.001$), *($p < 0.01$).

Results

Figure 1 presents the effects of different recruitment modes on response rates to the online survey. We find that invitation letters produced a significant boost in response rates in both countries.³ Response rates increased by 4.6 percentage points in Germany (s.e. = 0.01) and by 2.1 points in the United Kingdom (s.e. = 0.004). Letters were significantly more effective at increasing response rates in Germany (difference in differences 0.025; p -value = 0.01), despite the lower baseline response rate in the UK. This suggests important heterogeneity in the effectiveness of this recruitment strategy. When pooling results across countries, response rates improved by 2.8 percentage points (s.e. = 0.004).

But did the different recruitment modes impact the type of officials recruited, i.e., the characteristics of those taking the survey? Table 1 shows descriptive differences between subjects who completed the survey (post-treatment) and were recruited either by email or mail. We find that representatives recruited via letters tend to come from slightly smaller municipalities and are more likely to be men without a university education. There are no significant differences for the remaining observables. We also find no differences in response quality. Table 2 shows the effects of sending letter invitations on the quality of responses among those who participated in the survey. We find no relationship between recruitment mode and survey progress (column 1), whether officials finalized the survey (column 2), and time spent in the survey (column 3).

³Subjects who received the letter invitation overwhelmingly used the link/QR code provided in the letter to access the survey, suggesting that indeed the change in recruitment strategy attracted a different set of Respondents.

Table 1. Descriptives of survey respondents by recruitment mode

Covariate	Email	Letter	Diff. in means (<i>p</i> -value)	N
Population (inhabitants)	349,775	318,648	0.10	1,067
Age (years)	55.7	56.9	0.21	1,260
Women (%)	37.8	28.6	0.01	1,286
University degree (%)	60.8	54.5	0.04	1,575
Mayor (%)	10.6	13.1	0.23	1,575
In majority (%)	47.1	41.8	0.11	1,411
Left/right Ideology (0-10)	3.9	3.9	0.82	1,266
Labour Party (UK) (%)	37.8	33.1	0.32	509
SPD (Germany) (%)	27.1	27.1	0.99	827

Table 2. The effects of recruitment mode on response quality

	Progress (0–100)	Completed (binary)	Duration (minutes)
Letter	–1.300 (1.774)	–0.015 (0.025)	1.069 (0.847)
Constant	87.714** (0.945)	0.818** (0.013)	14.148** (0.453)
Country FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,575	1,575	1,521

Note: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$.

Cost-effectiveness of letter invitations

We have shown that invitation letters increase response rates of local politicians in Germany and the United Kingdom. However, this recruitment mode is costly. We paid 83 Euro Cent per letter (printing and stamp).⁴ Table 3 shows the number of letters sent and responses obtained by country. The cost per response in Germany was around 16 Euros and increased to 37 Euros in the United Kingdom. Using within-country postal services or targeting specific subpopulations of politicians that are more responsive to letter invitations could improve the cost-effectiveness of this recruitment mode.

⁴We used the same company based in Portugal to send letters across Europe.

Table 3. Costs per completed survey by mail

	Letters sent	Responses from letters	Cost per letter	Cost per response
Germany	2396	123	€ 0.83	≈ € 16.2
United Kingdom	5796	131	€ 0.83	≈ € 36.7

Discussion

We find that sending letter invitations in addition to emails increases response rates in online local elites surveys in Germany and the United Kingdom. Effect sizes are more than twice as high among German local officials. This suggests important heterogeneity in the effectiveness of this recruitment mode. Further research should explore the conditions that make different recruitment modes more effective. The effects of recruitment mode might be different if another elite population is targeted (Heinzel et al., 2025), the country selection is different, or additional recruitment methods such as phone calls are added to the mix (Walgrave and Joly, 2018). We also find mild differences in the socioeconomic composition of respondents recruited via mail or email, and no differences in response quality. Overall, the results provide a promising path to improve response rates in elite surveys, although the costs are non-negligible. For experimental research, this additional effort can meaningfully increase statistical power.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/xps.2025.10004>

Data availability. The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available in the Journal of Experimental Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NC8DIP> (Giger and Pereira, 2025). The analyses reported in the manuscript follow all the applicable reporting standards recommended by the APSA Organized Section on Experimental Research.

Competing interests. We report no conflicts of interest.

Ethics statement. This study received ethical approval from the University of Southern California (UP-22-00464) and the University of Geneva (CUREG-2022-08-83). The experimental design was not preregistered. This research adheres to APSA's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.

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