

The following are some methodological questions about *Fire and Ice* posed in an e-mail sent to Michael Adams by a sociology undergraduate in December 2004. Michael's response follows.

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*“How were people selected to be polled (ex. at a mall, at church, in their home, over the phone etc.)? Was it a random sample? Were the same people polled over the eight years, or were different people polled? How many people in each sample were polled and how many in each region were polled (ex. New England, Midwest, Prairies, Ontario etc)?*

*...if you're polling more people from a particular region, obviously the data will be skewed.”*

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10 January, 2005

Dear -----,

Thank you for your note and for your interest in *Fire and Ice*. I appreciate your wish to be sure about our methodology. As you probably know from your study of social research methods, there are many elements of our work which remain more art than science. That said, my colleagues and I do seek to measure phenomena in the way scientists do—with rigour and objectivity—and we make every effort to ensure that our methods are transparent to our readers.

The appendix in *Fire and Ice* on methodology explains how we analyze the data we collect, describes how we generate our maps and trends (collections of items or questions that measure a particular mental posture), and talks a little bit about the intellectual tradition in which our work participates.

Your questions concern sampling, an area we don't discuss in our appendix, but perhaps should consider including in the next book. The sample we use in our U.S. social values survey is a random sample, composed of different people in each wave of the survey (1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 to date). We select our respondents by dividing the continental United States into a grid containing one hundred segments, and then conducting twenty interviews in each of those segments.

We begin by selecting the households from which we will draw our respondents, and then we choose a particular individual from each household (according to a randomized pattern based on age and gender) in order to ensure that our sample is truly random.

Although it may be well distributed regionally and randomized properly, any random sample is unlikely to share the exact demographic characteristics of the American population at large. For this reason, pollsters must sometimes apply weighting to their random samples—to make the samples reflect known facts about the demographics of American society. For example, we know that approximately 51 per cent of the U.S. population is female, and 49 per cent is male. If a pollster's computer dialed 2000 phone numbers at random, and came up with a set of respondents that was only 47 per cent female, the pollster would make each woman's response count for slightly more and each man's response count for slightly less. The final results, therefore, would be more likely to accurately reflect public opinion, as they would be controlled for the influence people's demographic characteristics may have on the views they express.

Our social values surveys are paper surveys, which respondents complete by themselves in the privacy of their own homes. The surveys are hand-delivered by researchers who explain the survey process to the respondents, and answer any questions respondents may have. The researchers then return a few days later to pick up the completed questionnaires. We use paper surveys rather than face-to-face interviews in order to eliminate any bias the interviewer might introduce while gathering the data, whether by sending signals about his or her own opinions on the questions being asked or by merely being in the room: some people will write a personal opinion (perhaps an unpopular one) on a piece of paper but would have trouble speaking the same opinion aloud to another person (either in person or on the phone). Online surveys, which constitute a portion of our 2004 wave, share some of the advantages of paper surveys, but introduce other possible skews, since tech-savvy Internet users are likely to be better educated and more affluent than the population at large.

People often express skepticism about polls and surveys which rely on random samples. Nevertheless, polls have been fairly successful at gauging public opinion within their margin of error ever since George Gallup declared in 1936 that his random sample of a few thousand Americans would be better at predicting the outcome of the US presidential election than *Literary Digest's* sample of five million automobile and telephone owners. Gallup was right: while *Literary Digest's* millions saw a win for Republican Alfred Landon, Gallup's random thousands forecast the Roosevelt victory that eventually took place. Gallup's confidence seemed surprising at the time—how could just a few thousand people speak for an entire population? The idea is still remarkable today, even though its accuracy has been proven time and again for nearly 70 years. Polls will never be perfect because people are not mechanical. But it is an astounding and perhaps counter-intuitive fact that a thousand or two thousand people, demographically reflective of the population at large, will tend to consistently reflect the opinions of their entire society.

Again, many thanks for your interest in the book. I hope your boyfriend will now be willing to read it, in light of the legwork you have done. If not, perhaps he will read my next book, due to be published in fall 2005, which will contain our brand new 2004 data, and will deal exclusively with social change in the United States—without reference to that great nation's northern neighbour.

Sincerely,

Michael Adams