



# An Automated Refusal Conversion Strategy for Web Surveys

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Taylor Lewis<sup>1</sup> and Mark Gorsak<sup>1</sup>, U.S. Office of Personnel Management

Naomi Yount, Westat

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# Outline

## I. Background

- Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS)
- Refusal conversion

## II. 2017 FEVS Opt Out Experiment

- Motivation and Experimental Design
- Key Findings

## III. Summary and Ideas for Further Research



## Background on the FEVS

- The Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) is an annual, Web-based survey of full- and part-time, permanent federal employees administered by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM)
- As of 2017 FEVS: stratified, single-stage sample design of ~1.1M individuals from over 80 agencies → response rate around 45%
- Personalized survey link sent via email, with five weekly reminders sent to nonrespondents – six week field period in all
- Instrument consists mainly of attitudinal items (e.g., perceptions of leadership, job satisfaction) on a Likert-type scale, but also captures about a dozen demographics



# Background on Refusal Conversion

- Ample evidence that refusal rates to surveys are increasing, in turn increasing risk of nonresponse bias:
  - Groves and Couper (1998)
  - Atrostic et al. (2001)
  - de Leeuw and de Heer (2002)
  - Curtin et al. (2005)
  - Brick and Williams (2013)
  - Dutwin et al. (2014)
- Survey organizations typically attempt refusal conversion for interviewer-administered surveys (often excluding “hard” refusals), with success rates of 10 – 30%
- Not as straightforward to do in self-administered surveys because of ambiguity differentiating a refusal from other forms of nonresponse



## Offering a Way to Opt Out

- Argument in literature (e.g., Sudman, 1985; Mullen et al., 1987) that offering the respondent a way to opt out engenders trust and empathy with researcher, has potential to *increase* likelihood of participating
- In similar vein, Anderson (2015) argues administrators of online panels should abide by CAN-SPAM Act or 2003 statute requiring unsolicited emails to contain a visible unsubscribe link
- Our idea: use the opportunity to opt out of Web-based FEVS via link in email invitation that launches a short survey with two purposes:
  1. Ascertain why the individual has chosen not to respond
  2. Attempt a last-moment appeal (i.e., refusal conversion) based on the nonresponse reason cited



## Opt Out Experimental Design

- Approximately 10% of 2017 FEVS sample (small/independent agencies excluded) was designated for opt out, with a link in initial invitation and reminders labeled “Click here if you are considering not participating in the FEVS”

Your opinions matter! Let your leadership know how you feel about your job, your supervisor, and your agency. The Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey provides a safe and confidential way for you to voice your opinions.

[Click here to access your survey](#)

If the link does not take you directly to the survey, copy and paste the following into a browser window: <PERSONALIZED URL HERE>

[Click here if you are considering not participating in the FEVS](#)

Please DO NOT forward this e-mail, as it contains your personalized link to the survey. Answering the questions will take about 25 minutes, and you may use official time. While participation is voluntary, your feedback is important.

- Opt out link not present for those not designated for experiment



## Opt Out Experimental Design (2)

- Upon clicking on the opt out link, respondent is taken to following landing page:

The screenshot shows the landing page for the 2017 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. The header is teal with the year '2017' on the left, the survey title 'Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey' in the center, and the tagline 'Empowering Employees. Inspiring Change.' on the right. Below the header, a message reads: 'We are sorry to hear that you do not want to participate in the 2017 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. This is a voluntary survey and we respect your right not to participate.' Below this message is a question: 'Would you say that you are unsure about participating in the FEVS, or that you do not wish to participate?' with two radio button options: 'I am unsure about participating in the FEVS' and 'I do not wish to participate in the FEVS'.

- Purpose of this question: gauge nonresponse conviction level (i.e., a proxy for hard vs. soft refusal)
- Regardless of answer, all individuals see the following question...



## Opt Out Experimental Design (3)

2017

**Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey** *Empowering Employees. Inspiring Change.*

We would like to understand why people choose not to take the FEVS. Before we remove you from the survey participation list, could you please respond to the following question?  
Which of the reasons below MOST influenced your decision not to take the survey?

- I am too busy to take the survey
- I receive too many requests to take surveys
- Survey results are not used to change anything in my workplace
- I am concerned about the confidentiality of my responses
- Participation in the survey is not supported by leadership in my agency
- Survey results are never shared with employees
- Other, please specify:

- After answer this question, a predetermined 25% of individuals receive a confirmatory message that official FEVS emails will stop
- Complementary 75% of individuals given last-moment appeal tailored to the response given
- For example, if “I am too busy to take the survey” is chosen, the individual sees the following...





# Opt Out Experimental Design (4)

2017

**Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey** *Empowering Employees. Inspiring Change.*

Thank you for providing feedback about why you do not want to take the FEVS. You may already be aware, but let us remind you one last time of a few important points:

- As federal employees ourselves, the FEVS Team understands you are busy and that your time is valuable.
- The survey is sent to the minimum number of federal employees necessary to provide for a representative sample of the government-wide workforce.
- The survey should only take about 25 minutes to complete.
- You are allowed to complete the survey during regular work hours but, if necessary, you can complete it during non-work hours from any Web browser.

[I will take the survey now](#)

[Previous Page](#) [I do not want to take the survey](#)

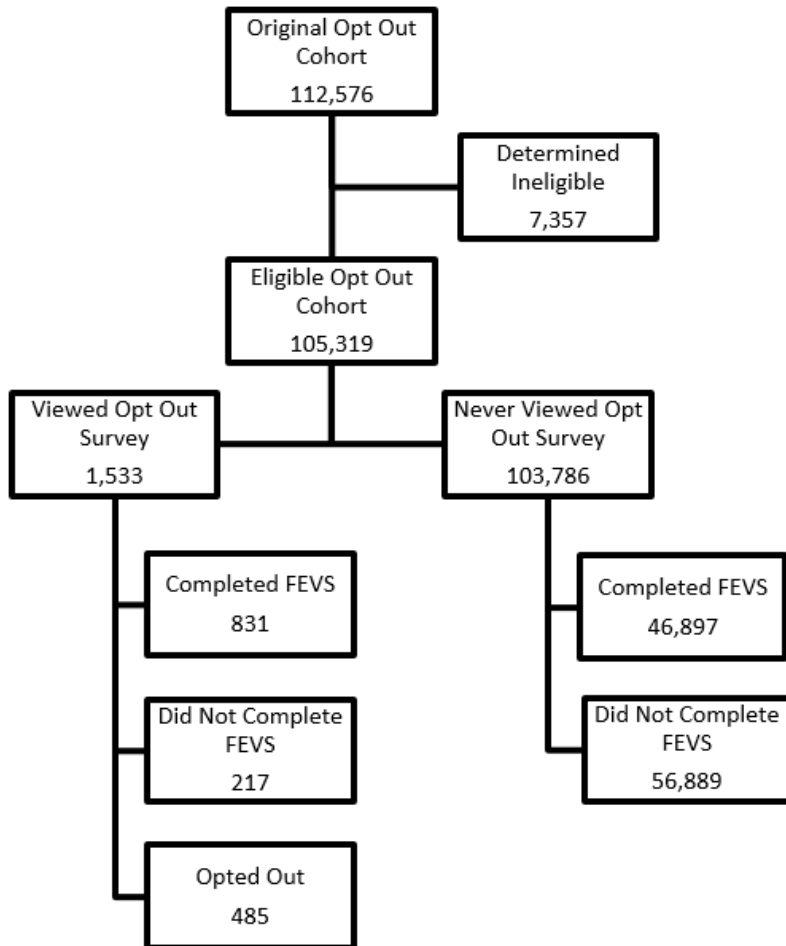
- “Other” responses received generic appeal, and write-ins were independently coded by two team members; 128 differences reconciled
- Research objective: quantify the effectiveness of last-moment appeal (i.e., conversion rate) by nonresponse conviction level and primary reason cited



# Opt Out Experiment Results

## Comments:

- Surprisingly low rate of individuals clicking on opt out link (~1.5%)
- Individuals who launched the opt out survey were about twice as likely to respond to FEVS than opt out
- Ultimately, response rate 9 percentage points higher for those who clicked on the opt out link relative to those who did not: 54.2% vs. 45.2%.





# Conversion Rates by Nonrespondent Type

Condition	Count of Individuals	Conversion Rate
<i>Nonresponse Conviction Level</i>		
Unsure about participating	325	62.8
Do not want to participate	551	20.3
<i>Nonresponse Reason</i>		
Too busy	118	22.9
Receive too many survey requests	80	20.0
Survey results are not used to change anything	226	25.2
Confidentiality concerns	186	47.3
Participation not supported by agency leadership	12	58.3
Survey results never shared with employees	24	29.2
Recent employment change	29	37.9
Dislike format / technical issues	34	32.4
Indifference	9	0.0
Claim already completed survey	7	57.1
Other	50	40.0

### Comments:

- To be expected, conversion rate was much higher for individuals unsure about participating
- Varied success amongst the various nonresponse reasons



# Conversion Rates by Appeal Type

Conditions	<i>No Appeal</i>		<i>Tailored Appeal</i>	
	Count of Individuals	Conversion Rate	Count of Individuals	Conversion Rate
<i>Nonresponse Conviction Level</i>				
Unsure about participating	91	52.7	234	66.7
Do not want to participate	124	13.7	427	22.2
<i>Nonresponse Reason</i>				
Too busy	22	9.1	96	26.0
Receive too many survey requests	21	9.5	59	23.7
Survey results are not used to change anything	54	18.5	172	27.3
Confidentiality concerns	35	20.0	151	53.6

### Comments:

- Only shown are results where counts for both appeal types at least 20
- For all combinations, tailored appeal increased the conversion rate
- Effect higher for individuals unsure about responding relative to individuals not wanting to participate: 14 percentage point increase vs. 8.5
- Biggest increase for those indicating concerns over confidentiality; smallest for those believing results not used to change anything (only increase not statistically significant)



## Summary and Ideas for Further Research

- Including opportunity to opt out was a net positive feature: led to increased response rate and a glimpse into distribution of reasons for nonresponse
- Surprisingly low rate (~1.5%) of individuals clicking link to opt out  
→ to capture more people, future study could consider:
  - Place opt out opportunity in separate email or mode
  - Different wording or location within email body
- Conversion rates varied notably by tailored appeal type, suggesting more room for improvement in wording; focus groups could lead to more persuasive messaging in bullet points



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