



Comparative Attitudinal Research in Europe

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to place the new European Social Survey within the context of related European research projects, both substantively and methodologically, and to outline the ESS's distinctive features. By 'related projects' in this context, we mean other large-scale, cross-national, quantitative surveys in Europe whose aim is to measure, interpret and understand changes over time in people's opinions, attitudes, values and beliefs. We start with a brief justification of such surveys.

2. The need for comparative attitudinal research

Long before the concept of 'globalisation' had become prominent in political and economic discourse, academics and policy-makers alike had urged the need for reliable and comparable cross-national measures of inter-societal change. They argued persuasively that well-founded data of this sort would improve our understanding of the nature and impact of differences in economic, social, cultural and structural arrangements between countries. They cited comparative research findings that had helped to illuminate and explain key differences in political culture between nations (eg Almond and Verba, 1989; Barnes and Kaase, 1979). And they pointed to the potential benefits of such data to academic analysis and cross-national governance (Davis *et al*, 1994; Kish, 1994:177; Øyen, 1990:1; Samuel, 1985:4; Rabier, 1965).

Moreover, in the context of European integration, reliable cross-national data of a high and consistent quality are not just desirable but essential. Neither the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers, nor the Commission could be expected to operate successfully without access to comprehensive, accurate data about the changing face of the EU. Whether in formulating or implementing Europe-wide policies, close account must necessarily be taken of the circumstances and preferences of those who are the potential beneficiaries of such policies - their living conditions, economic situations, cultural and leisure pursuits, as well as their aspirations and values. If European governance is to be effective, it must be alert and responsive to the interactions between Europe's changing institutions on the one hand and the changing attitudes, values and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations on the other.

Eurostat already collects or compiles invaluable comparative time series on many aspects of these interactions, but - in common with other official statistical agencies - it does not deal in time series of attitudes and values. That is not of course to suggest that the new European Social Survey (ESS) is to be either the first or only survey designed to measure changing public attitudes in Europe. Nor will it be the last.

In contrast to the first generation of comparative opinion and attitude surveys in Europe, however, the ESS has been designed specifically to conform closely to the methodological standards of the best Eurostat time series. Its compass is therefore wider than most opinion surveys and of course its budget is necessarily larger. It aims in essence to be the primary vehicle for charting and helping to explain changes over time in the underlying attitudes, values and beliefs of the population of Europe during the early part of the 21st century. To achieve that objective, it must ideally cover not only all countries within the EU itself, but also all associated and candidate

countries. As Sanders (1994:151) has noted, comparison with other societies is a vital means of understanding one's own society, or, in Durkheim's rather more heroic phrase: "Comparative sociology is not a branch of sociology; it is sociology itself".

3. What other sources exist?

We will not refer at length in this paper to the various well-established and regularly-quarried Eurostat time series, which cover a range of economic and social developments in Europe. Increasingly valuable as they are both to European governance and academic analysis, they are almost entirely outside the scope of a paper on attitudinal measures. True, attitudinal questions are not entirely absent from series such as the Labour Force Survey or the European Community Household Panel, but they are essentially incidental to their behavioural and factual focus. We concentrate here on surveys whose very purpose, like that of the ESS, is to measure and monitor wide-ranging attitudinal and value changes across Europe.

There are four primary sources of such data:

- Commercial opinion polls
- The Eurobarometer
- The European Values Survey (EVS)
- The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)

3.1 *Commercial opinion polls*

Mostly conducted at a national level but occasionally at a cross-national level too, are numerous commercial opinion polls, usually funded by the mass media and designed essentially as swift measures of public responses to topical issues. Important as such pulse-taking exercises are, they are designed in effect to chart short-term changes in the weather, rather than to detect climate changes - which is the task of the more ambitious continuous (or regular) social research studies above. Their methods and budgets thus tend to match their transitory purpose, which is generally to fill a column or two of a newspaper. They frequently serve the important purpose of alerting the Commission, the European Parliament or national politicians to potential or actual problems in the interpretation or reception of European initiatives. But they do not aim to describe or interpret underlying shifts in values over time. On the contrary, the objects of their focus tend to change too fast for that purpose.

3.2 *The Eurobarometer*

The Eurobarometer survey series, initiated and run by the Commission, has been the pathfinder of quantitative attitudinal measurement across Europe. It has established itself over the years as an essential tool of the Commission, regularly gathering data on "the topic most dear to its heart: the process of European unification, as reflected in the attitudes and beliefs of the people in the EU member states" (Saris & Kaase, 1997:9). But the series has been, and continues to be, more than just a tool for the Commission. Its findings have been used by academic social scientists throughout the world (Inglehart, 1990; Reif & Inglehart, 1991). For instance, it has not only been the principal source of cross-national empirical data on attitudes to European integration over time, but also one of the best sources to document shifts in European

attitudes to the environment. As a twice-yearly survey carried out since 1973 on behalf of the Commission, it continues to be a vital tracking mechanism on issues to do with actual and potential policy developments in the European Union – subjects that are, of course, of wide interest to analysts and commentators well beyond the Commission.

There are, however, three features of the Eurobarometer series that would make it an inappropriate vehicle to attempt to chart and explain movements in a wider range of underlying mass attitudes and values over time.

First, the series has always been explicitly designed to serve the interests and respond to the demands of the Commission and other EU institutions. To do its job properly it cannot risk being colonised for other more academically-orientated or curiosity-driven concerns. Unlike the classic general social surveys (in GB or in Germany or, for that matter, in the US) the Eurobarometer's autonomy, independence and freedom of action is - and is seen to be - constrained.

Second, as a pioneering project in European cross-national research, the founders of the Eurobarometer understandably did not feel able at its outset to insist on high or consistent standards of research and data collection in all participating countries. Instead, in order no doubt to get the series up and running in what were then unpromising circumstances, they laid much less stress on methodological 'purity' than would be appropriate now. Naturally, the series has improved its standards since the early days, but it is still known less for consistent or exemplary methods than for its admirably consistent substantive focus.

Third, the very fact that the Eurobarometer has been collecting relevant repeat measures for almost 30 years means that there is insufficient space for the wholesale introduction of a new agenda, including many questions that might not be seen as appropriate for the Commission to initiate as the direct 'client'.

Although flexible to a degree, the fact is that the Eurobarometer, in common with other time series such as the EVS and ISSP (see below), has its own agenda to maintain and protect. To accommodate major externally-led changes and innovations either in its methodology or its substantive focus would thus be likely to damage the Eurobarometer's central role as a longstanding and well-utilised time series.

3.3 *The European Values Study (EVS)*

A second well-established and much-cherished European time series is the EVS, from which the World Values Study (WVS) developed. Funded by a private foundation, the primary focus of the EVS is on changing moral and social values, with particular emphasis on Christian values and their possible replacement by alternative 'meaning systems' (see Halman, 2001). The first round of the EVS was in 1981, the second in 1990, and the third in 1999/2000. It may conduct future rounds more frequently. Once again, its agenda is full and its focus confined. Like the Eurobarometer, it does not pretend to be, nor doubtless has any wish to become, a 'general social survey' along the lines of the new ESS.

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3.4 *The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)*

Started in 1985 by a group of four institutions (in GB, the USA, Germany and Australia), the ISSP has grown into a 36-nation voluntary grouping of institutions who field an annual module of mutually-agreed questions on a chosen topic area. Each module is designed to be repeated at (irregular) intervals to allow measures of change over time and between countries. Its origins help to explain the ISSP's informal structure and lack of regulation, since it "came into being without much serious planning, having emerged as a vague idea during an impromptu meeting" and has since grown "somewhat haphazardly" (Davis & Jowell, 1989:3). As Kish rightly describes it, the ISSP is in effect rather more of a "cross-national collaboration of national studies" than a truly cross-national survey (Kish, 1994:178), since it has no central funds and survives in many countries simply by 'piggy-backing' on other national studies.

In any event, the ISSP does not of course fulfil the role of a European general social survey. For a start, it is much more diverse geographically, extending to institutions in six continents. Secondly, its continued programme of repeat measures, already spanning eighteen years, is planned and agreed for the foreseeable future. Thirdly, it covers only one topic per year and is restricted to a 15-minute questionnaire.

3.5 *Summary*

Although all of the above time series are of great value to European social science and governance, they do not, either singly or in combination, remotely fill the need that the new European Social Survey is designed to fill. By the same token, the new ESS is not remotely designed to replace or impinge on any of these important time series. It will deliberately attempt to achieve some overlap in coverage with them so that cross-fertilisation becomes possible in the future, but its aim is essentially to complement and expand on their coverage and to contribute to the development of cross-national methodology.

4 **The twin aims of the ESS**

We have considered above the first central aim of the ESS, which is to measure and interpret changes over time in the underlying attitudes, values, perceptions and behaviour patterns of the peoples of Europe, and the interaction of such changes with changing economic, social and political circumstances. To achieve well-founded measures of this sort across a diverse range of countries requires a special collection of skills and capacities. First, a multinational venture of this kind must be able to draw on expert skills in research and survey design. Second, it must have a suitable organisational structure and chain of command. Third, it must have access to the best European fieldwork organisations to ensure that its regular rounds of data collection in each participating country are carried out to the same exacting standards.

This objective is linked inexorably to the ESS's second central aim, which is to become an exemplar of, and pathfinder for, improved cross-national social survey and research methods. There has been much discussion over the years about the difficulties inherent in rigorous comparative research (see, among others, Hantrais & Mangen, 1996; Hakim, 1991; Samuel, 1985). Yet in many respects national surveys

face similar problems to those that confound cross-national surveys. After all, no nation state is homogeneous with respect to vocabulary, modes of expression, levels of education and so on. Indeed, within-country differences are often larger than between country differences (Scheuch, 1989:155). Yet partly because of the expense of multi-country surveys, and partly because of an undue respect (in this context) for different methodological 'habits' in different countries, too much methodological variation has been tolerated in such surveys with often disastrous consequences.

The ESS in contrast aims to achieve uniform methodological standards that make it at least as rigorous as the very best national surveys within Europe. In this respect the ESS has the advantage of being able to build on the experience of other such studies and to learn from their mistakes. In any event, the ESS aspires to setting and achieving higher survey standards than have probably ever been attempted in a large-scale cross-national survey. This means eschewing the sorts of compromises that are all too common in cross-national collaborations. Prompted by a form of *politesse* that shies away from imposing and sticking to high common standards, they end up sacrificing even the possibility of consistent rigour. The philosophy of the ESS is that a social science investment of this magnitude and importance demands, above all, the uncompromising pursuit of uniformly high methodological standards.

5 Methodological challenges for the ESS

While entirely comparable datasets are impossible to achieve even from separate samples in the same country, let alone from over twenty different countries, there is still debate as to whether *sufficiently* comparable data can in fact be compiled in a cross-national study to make the investment worthwhile (see, for instance, Jowell, 1998; Kuechler, 1998; Hantrais and Mangen, 1996; Alwin *et al*, 1994). Indeed, as a famous comparative researcher once put it over 30 years ago, "it is easier to explicate (the problems) than to suggest ways of dealing with them" (Verba, 1969:54, cited in Van Deth, 1998:2; see also Øyen, 1990:3). In any event, "scholarly insights and good intentions are often in conflict with practical restrictions" (Kuechler, 1998:195).

Much of the literature on cross-national research refers to the quest for 'equivalence' and how elusive it usually turns out to be (see, for instance, Bulmer, 1998; Van Deth, 1998; Alwin *et al*, 1994; Sanders, 1994; Hakim, 1991; Samuel, 1985; Deutscher, 1973). As noted, not only are there always linguistic, cultural and conceptual barriers which impede strict comparability, but there are also country-specific differences and preferences in modes of interviewing, coding and, above all, sampling, as well as wide variations in response rates (and how to measure them), interviewer training and socio-demographic classifications (see ESS FP5 Call 2 proposal, B4.4).

A persistent problem in the pursuit of functional equivalence in cross-national surveys is that the wholesale adoption of precisely the same methods or procedures in all countries does not necessarily achieve it. On the contrary, it is often preferable to tolerate variation in certain procedures precisely in order to achieve the same common goal. We focus on these issues in this section.

5.1 Linguistic and conceptual equivalence

Linguistic idiosyncracies are among the most common barriers to optimal comparability between fieldwork in different countries (see Buckley, 1998:228). Indeed, *literal* translations are more likely than not to be counterproductive when trying to achieve equivalent meanings in a questionnaire. More subtle treatments are necessary, recognising that language exists within a larger cultural context (Hakim, 1991:111; Deutscher, 1973:174), and that equivalence of meaning requires from translators a painstaking and systematic approach (Harkness (1999:126).

Until recently, the most commonly-used form of translation for questionnaires was iterative back-translation, where the source questionnaire is first translated into the required languages, and then translated back into the source language to see if and in what way the original question had been corrupted. This method was first advocated for translation in cross-cultural psychology studies in the 1970s (see Brislin, 1970) and was then adopted as the 'gold standard' by the next generation of cross-national studies in the social sciences. But Harkness (1999) argues persuasively against back-translation for theoretical and practical reasons, describing them as merely a (sub-optimal) procedure for *checking* translations. Other scholars had earlier made some of the same criticisms, characterising back-translation as a method of achieving *linguistic* equivalence without taking due account of *context* and milieu (see, for instance, Warwick and Osherson, 1973:28-33, cited in Bulmer, 1998:161.

In truth, however, many cross-national studies do not insist on any systematic method of translating the source questionnaire into other languages, leaving that critical process to chance. In the 1999/2000 EVS, for instance, the majority of participating countries did not check their translated questionnaires by back-translating, the only method specified (Halman, 2001). And in the ISSP, similar omissions are common (Park and Jowell, 1996). The effects of these omissions are often serious. For instance, analysis of the 1999/2000 EVS has highlighted problems of equivalence in respect of several questions in several countries (Halman, 2001; Alwin *et al*, 1994).

Bulmer (1998:161) argues in favour of detailed annotation of the source questionnaire to ensure that the concepts and dimensions being tested are clear. To its credit, this has been done for some time in the Eurobarometer surveys for new, potentially difficult concepts. Harkness (1999) takes this idea further, suggesting that information, annotation and documentation need to be introduced both before and after the translation process and include reports of difficulties and differences in translation and fielding, plus records of assessment procedures employed.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is astonishing that so many major cross-national surveys have employed such a haphazard approach to translation, which is self-evidently one of the most important components of quality and equivalence in a cross-national study. The ESS will, of course, seek to remedy this omission. In addition to a heavy emphasis on annotation and documentation, it will employ a multi-stage pre-testing and piloting process to ensure functional equivalence at both a conceptual and linguistic level (see FP5 Call 2 proposal, B5.4.3).

5.2 *Sampling equivalence and response rates*

Another key element of equivalence in cross-national surveys relates to the sampling schema applied. At its simplest, each national sample should be of equivalent size and represent its population in an equivalent way. But to achieve such equivalence certain preferred (and often well-established) sampling schemas must perforce be ruled out of contention. But in many cases this has not happened, thus breaching the 'principle of equivalence' (Jowell, 1998). Even if the sampling schemas are identical, however, response rates (measured in a prescribed way) should not vary too greatly for fear of under-representing certain groups in some countries more than in other countries. Post-stratification can on occasions mitigate the effects of such biases, but this becomes yet another source of variance and is thus better avoided.

Some European-wide surveys – such as Eurobarometer in its early days - have made use of 'quota samples' in preference to the scientifically more acceptable technique of probability sampling. More recently, the Eurobarometer and others have attempted improvements by adopting 'random route' procedures which – though cheaper than address or individual-based random samples – are notoriously difficult to standardise and control in a national setting, let alone cross-nationally.

Another issue that ought to be (but is frequently not) standardised in cross-national surveys is whether to permit substitution of sampling units (individuals or addresses) who have proved difficult to locate or unwilling to grant an interview. Best practice, as in the ESS, forbids such substitution, for three principal reasons.

First, if we allow interviewers the option of simply replacing all 'difficult' cases by substitutes (even randomly-selected substitutes), we effectively encourage them to give up too early on trying to recruit such people into the sample. The more 'rational' option for a hard-pressed interviewer is merely to substitute them for 'easier' respondents. Secondly, the precise level of response rates – an important measure of a survey's success both nationally and cross-nationally – becomes more difficult to calculate and more prone to inappropriate adjustment when the interviewer has the discretion to replace one member of the population by another as if all potential respondents were entirely interchangeable. The 'true' response rate in such circumstances tend to be elusive and often artificially high.

The third and most important disadvantage of permitting substitution is that it can lead to 'availability biases' in the overall sample composition. Research has shown that difficult to locate or reluctant respondents (who are under-represented when substitution is permitted) tend to differ in material ways from more available respondents (Jowell *et al*, 1993). The consequence can be a skewed sample which is very difficult to remedy by normal weighting procedures.

So the most rigorous national surveys all tend to avoid substitution. Surprisingly, however, this has not always been the case in cross-national surveys. For instance, 19 of the 32 participating countries in the EVS permitted substitution either during the selection process or during fieldwork (Halman, 2001). Likewise, in about one half of the ISSP countries, substitution occurs at some stage of the selection process (Park & Jowell, 1996). In contrast, neither the Eurobarometer these days nor the European Community Household Panel permit substitution.

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As noted, under ESS rules neither quota sampling nor substitution will be permitted at any stage in any country.

A related issue is the need to reduce variation in response rates. For instance, recorded ISSP response rates varied from 56 per cent (Latvia) to 94 per cent (Bulgaria), almost certainly because Bulgaria employed substitution and Latvia did not. Presumably partly for the same reason, but also because of widely differing levels of rigour in fieldwork procedures, recorded EVS response rates varied even more - from a low of 13 per cent (Spain) to a high of 95 per cent (Slovakia). It is partly for this reason that the ESS has set a 'target' response rate in all countries of 70 per cent. The target will not, of course, be uniformly achieved in all countries, but because it is pre-specified to competing survey agencies, it at least becomes a contractual obligation for all fieldwork agencies to strive for and, more importantly, to budget for.

A fundamental sampling issue is the definition of eligibility, which must of course be constant across countries. Yet, surprisingly perhaps, this is not always the case in cross-national surveys. For instance, among the countries participating in ISSP, lower age cut-off points vary between the ages of 15 and 18, and certain countries impose an upper age cut-off of 74 (Park & Jowell, 1996). The same is true of the EVS, where different decisions are also permitted in respect of whether to include or exclude people in institutions (Halman, 2001). Even some of the Eurostat surveys change their definitions half way through the time series. Thus, the definition of the sampled population in the Labour Force Survey varied between rounds: until 1985, it included all persons aged 15-74, but in 1986 the upper age limit was cut to 69.

The ESS definition of national eligibility, which we trust will remain in place in all countries, defines the eligible population in each participating country as people aged 15 or over (no upper age limit) who are resident within private households, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, language or legal status.

Just as in translation, nothing is served by closely specifying from the centre either a particular sampling frame or a specific micro-method (see Kish, 1994). Rather, it is the detailed sampling *principles* that need to be closely specified (eg strict and exclusively probability methods, no substitution, detail of eligibility rules, etc), leaving it to each nation to propose a sampling schema that conforms closely to those characteristics. In the ESS, these proposals are then 'negotiated' with an expert multinational sampling panel before being officially signed off.

5.3 *Modes of data collection and context*

The chosen mode of data collection - whether face-to-face, telephone or self-completion - varies between cross-national surveys in Europe, and to some extent within such surveys. Most, including the EVS, the ECHP, the LFS and the standard Eurobarometer, use only face-to-face interviewing in respondents' homes. ISSP in contrast is administered either as a self-completion questionnaire - often but not always 'piggy backing' on a longer face-to-face survey - or as a face-to-face survey itself. In contrast, the Eurobarometer Flash surveys and the Continuous Tracking Survey employed telephone interviews. We considered the possible use of telephone interviewing for the ESS, but the very different rates of telephone ownership across Europe and the proposed length of the ESS interview (one hour) dissuaded us. We

therefore specified face-to-face interviewing throughout the ESS in order to keep mode constant rather than introducing another source of possible variance between countries (see Saris & Kaase, 1997:168-9).

For the ESS, in common with some but not all other cross-national surveys, we also specified a particular four-month period within which fieldwork was to take place. For an attitude survey in particular, concurrent fieldwork is important (see Kish, 1994:172), because major national and international events can affect responses either short term or long term. This has been a problem for the ISSP, where in some countries the fieldwork dates are wholly dependent on those of the piggy-back provider survey. As a result, fieldwork in ISSP surveys can vary across an 18-month period.

Even within a four-month fieldwork period, however, major events can influence or shape attitudes. So, the ESS has introduced an innovation of an events data file to be archived in conjunction with the main ESS dataset. Each national participant will record major events in their country before and during fieldwork that might have a (temporary or longer term) impact on answers to ESS questions. Such events could be elections, economic crises, civil disturbances, political scandals or resignations, or any other event relevant to the survey questions that occupies the front pages of the newspapers for several days. The central team will also record pan-European or other international events of the same nature so that a comprehensive data file can be compiled for the benefit of future data analysts.

5.4 *Management and budgets*

Large-scale cross-national research projects tend to stand or fall according to the effectiveness of their project management and co-ordination. In the absence of an appropriate organisational structure to design, negotiate and oversee the chosen methodology in each participating country, there is little hope of achieving equivalence. Certainly it cannot be achieved by simply trying to impose from above a particular method or questionnaire onto a group of 'obedient' participants. That particular form of 'collaboration' – dubbed the 'safari method' by its detractors – has failed too often (see Hantrais & Mangen, 1996; Jowell, 1998; Sanders, 1994). The preferable arrangement is what Hantrais *et al* (1985) refer to as the 'symmetrical model', according to which all participating nations participate in the formulation and implementation of design and methodology, recognising that single solutions (though sometimes sub-optimal in certain countries) are sometimes essential for the common cause.

Unlike most other cross-national studies, the ISSP has no central funds and thus no permanent structure to ensure methodological compliance. As Park and Jowell (1996) note, this results in significant variations in method and standards. Attempts have been made over the years to mitigate this problem, but in the absence of central finance and co-ordination, the difficulties are endemic. Given these constraints, the ISSP has made remarkable attempts to keep its act together via a sequence of voluntary contributions (in the form of time commitments) by many of its member organisations. It defies the rule that central finance and co-ordination are pre-requisites of an impressive cross-national time series. Equally, however, it demonstrates why such arrangements are highly desirable.

In the light of the experiences of other cross-national collaborations, the ESS organisational structure incorporates both top-down and bottom-up components. On the one hand, a top-down regime of sorts is essential if the ESS is to succeed in setting and adhering to considerably higher technical standards than other cross-national attitude surveys have done. Thus a small, tightly-knit core group (the Central Co-ordinating Team) is responsible for the design and co-ordination of the project, and has clearly-defined roles and chains of command. But this team is deliberately 'surrounded' by a network of other groups, all of whom have key interests in the project and well-defined roles. Thus the National Co-ordinators in all participating countries also meet together from time to time, as does a Scientific Advisory Board representing the national funding bodies in all those countries. Meanwhile various expert panels have been formed to advise on and help implement different aspects of the project, including the two rotating questionnaire modules, the sampling schemas in all countries, the process of translation into other languages from the English source questionnaire, and the continuous improvement of methods.

This network is designed to ensure that optimal comparability between national surveys is achieved through discussion and negotiation rather than by *diktat*.

5.5 *Access to data*

It is axiomatic that the considerable investment in large cross-national studies should be rewarded by the speedy availability of their rich data to the academic and policy communities. Technical advances in recent years mean that very swift and widespread access is no longer merely an aspiration.

Thus the complaints that have been made in the past about late access to European survey datasets such as the LFS (see for instance Hakim, 1991:104) and the EVS (the 1999 dataset has still not been released except to participants) should not arise in the case of the ESS. No privileged access will be given to participants. Instead, the ESS Archive (NSD Norway) is charged with releasing a fully-documented ESS dataset as soon as it is available – which is scheduled to be within six months of the end of fieldwork. Anonymised data will thus be available to users worldwide both online for download (via FTP or Web application) and offline (via CD-ROM). Moreover the data will be ready for use in all common statistical packages, together with a technical report, codebook and questionnaires in a universal document exchange format.

6. Conclusion

No survey (whether a national or a cross-national survey) is ever perfect or perfectible. Even the most distinguished surveys are flawed in numerous ways. It is also undeniable that, given their multi-layered extra levels of variability and complexity, even the best cross-national surveys are more problematic than their best national counterparts. In these respects, of course, the ESS will be no exception. On the other hand, because it is in a position to benefit from the experience of its forerunner surveys in Europe and beyond, the ESS has a great opportunity to take a stride forward. For the sake both of European social science and European governance, we sincerely hope we prove capable of achieving even modest progress.

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