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# Measuring the Risks of Panel Conditioning in Survey Research

*Conditioning does not contribute significant error to panel estimates*

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## How we did this

Pew Research Center conducted a series of analyses exploring data quality in its U.S. surveys, specifically those conducted on the Center's online survey platform, the [American Trends Panel \(ATP\)](#). The goal was to determine whether participation in the panel changed respondents' true or reported behavior over time (either immediately or over a longer period), a phenomenon referred to as panel conditioning. Because panel conditioning can be difficult to isolate from other differences (e.g., true change over time, reliability), analyses to detect conditioning were conducted in three different ways. First, an experiment was conducted in 2019-2020 in which some panelists were asked to complete several more surveys than others to determine if repeated exposure introduced conditioning. Second, estimates from newly recruited cohorts were compared with estimates from existing panelists at different points in time to determine if the existing panelists had different behaviors due to conditioning. Third, researchers appended administrative data on voting behavior pre- and post-empanelment to determine whether individuals changed their voting behavior over time, a sign of conditioning. All analyses were conducted using specially designed weights to control for panel attrition over time, cohort-level differences and variations in sampling procedures.

## Measuring the Risks of Panel Conditioning in Survey Research

### *Conditioning is not contributing significant error to panel estimates*

As public opinion polling increasingly moves toward the use of online panels, one threat that pollsters face is the possibility that their data could be damaged by interviewing the same set of people over and over again. The concern is that repetitive interviewing may introduce [panel conditioning](#), a state in which panelists change their beliefs or behavior just by being exposed to and answering a variety of questions over time.

Panel conditioning can have a harmful effect on data quality if respondents change their original attitudes and behaviors because of the survey stimulus. For example, an individual respondent may not have heard of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, her role, party affiliation or voting record. They would not be alone, as [41%](#) of U.S. adults could not name the speaker of the House, and more than 10% reported never having heard her name. Panel conditioning would occur if the mere act of asking panelists about political leaders (e.g., “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Nancy Pelosi is handling her job as speaker of the House?”) causes panelists to [seek out more information](#) about them, form new opinions or become more politically engaged than they would otherwise have been had they not joined the panel.




Alternatively, panel conditioning can have a [beneficial effect](#) on data quality when participation elicits more accurate reporting over time. Panelists may become more reflective of their own behaviors and attitudes and be able to [more accurately](#) report them. As the researcher and respondent build rapport, panelists may also become [more willing to report](#) their true behaviors and attitudes.

A new study explored potential risks and benefits from repeated interviewing of participants in Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel (ATP). Among the key findings:

**There was no evidence that conditioning has biased ATP estimates for news consumption, discussing politics, political partisanship or voting, though empanelment led to a slight uptick in voter registration.** Multiple analyses conducted on variables deemed most susceptible to panel conditioning by Center staff failed to identify any change in respondents’ media consumption and dialogue behaviors, party identification, or voting record. However, empanelment did have a small effect on voter registration. Analysis of differences between ATP cohorts suggested that panelists were slightly more likely to register to vote soon after joining the ATP.

## Multiple analyses demonstrate minimal effects of panel conditioning on behavioral and attitudinal change

*Some evidence of reporting changes due to panel conditioning*

-  Older cohorts report **lower** levels of the behavior compared to newer cohorts
-  Older cohorts report **higher** levels of the behavior compared to newer cohorts
-  No systematic conditioning effect in either direction

Analysis ...	MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND DIALOGUE			PARTY AFFILIATION AND ACTIVISM		
	Follow government	Follow news	Discuss politics	Party identification	Registered to vote	Vote
... of an experiment (1)						N/A
... across cohorts (2)						N/A
... of commercial voter files (3)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of multiple surveys on the American Trends Panel and commercial voter files. "Measuring the Risks of Panel Conditioning in Survey Research"

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### **There is some evidence that panelists may change their reporting post-recruitment, likely improving data quality.**

On average, empaneled members reported less media consumption and dialogue in three out of six analyses. Evidence was mixed on whether these changes occurred gradually or soon after empanelment. While lower reports of consumption and dialogue may indicate higher misreporting when some response choices prompt several follow-up questions, the ATP rarely includes this type of design. Lower reports are likely, but not conclusively, an indicator of more accurate reporting and higher data quality over time.

Conditioning effects are difficult to isolate from true change over time, differences in panel cohorts, panel attrition and changes in measurements due to methodological enhancements. To ensure that all findings were replicable and robust, researchers began by selecting the six variables hypothesized to be most susceptible to conditioning – three media consumption and dialogue variables and three political affiliation and activism variables. Researchers then conducted three different types of analyses on the chosen variables. These included:

1. A randomized experiment executed around the 2020 election in which some panelists were asked questions susceptible to conditioning less often and some more often over time.
2. A comparison of newer cohorts (who have been asked these items less frequently as an effect of joining the panel more recently) and older cohorts across a five-year time frame.
3. A comparison of voter turnout records pre- and post-empanelment.

For this analysis, increasing trends over time among those empaneled (all else being equal) were interpreted as signs of a harmful and less accurate conditioning effect. This would include becoming more likely to follow government affairs, follow the news, discuss current events and politics, register to vote, identify as a member of a primary political party or vote as time since joining the panel increases. This assumption is founded in the [theory](#) that respondents' awareness is raised and their interest is piqued when asked about a subject, increasing the frequency of these behaviors.

Decreasing frequencies may be the result of harmful or helpful effects of conditioning. Respondents may try to ["game"](#) the survey, answering in a manner that they believe will yield fewer follow-up questions and make the survey shorter. This can harm data quality. However, "gaming" is unlikely on the ATP since the length of the survey is rarely correlated with the response to a given question. Instead, decreasing frequencies are likely an indicator of improved data quality. These interpretations are consistent with the theory of [social desirability bias](#), the idea that respondents wish to be seen favorably by researchers so they generally overreport good behaviors (e.g., voting). Only after building rapport and trust with the researcher are they more likely to report honestly and accurately.

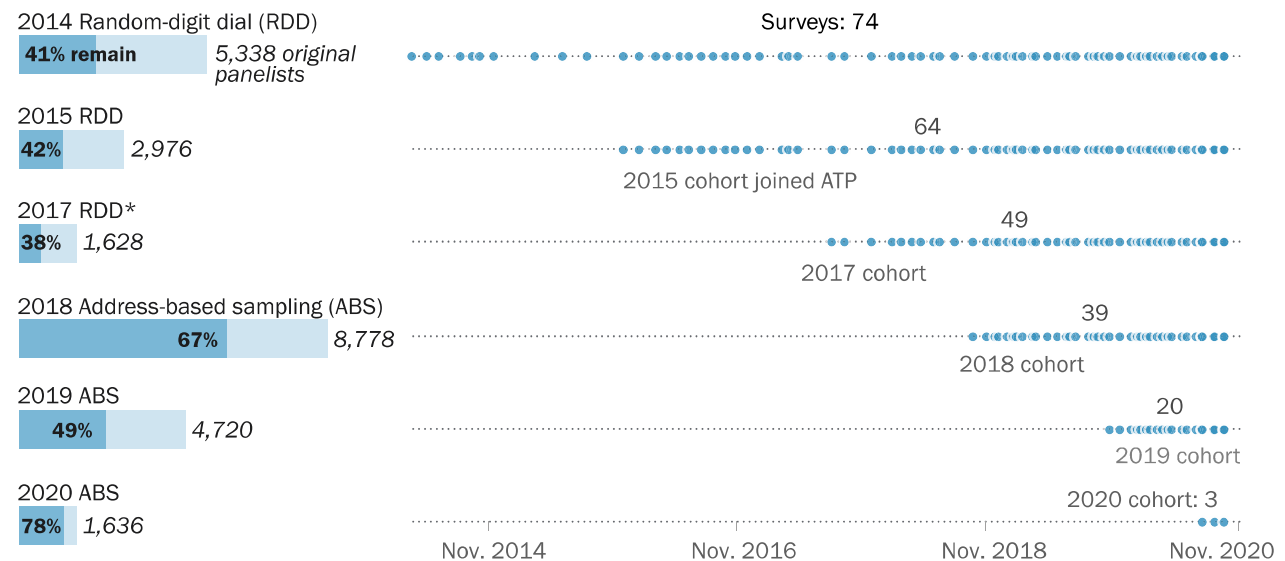
Given the consistency of the results across all three sets of analyses and the fact that the variables used in the analyses were considered the most likely offenders, current methods appear to be sufficient to stave off large-scale harmful effects of panel conditioning and may improve data quality over time.

## There's potential for panel conditioning on the ATP

Pew Research Center collects over 15 million data points every year from over 13,000 American Trends Panel (ATP) panelists. The [ATP](#) is comprised of individuals who have been recruited to take about two surveys per month. Between its inception in 2014 and October 2020, 74 surveys were conducted using the ATP. Over the years, the Center has recruited individuals to the panel a total of six times (about once per year) to replace individuals who have opted out and to grow the size of the panel. This means that the 2,188 individuals who were recruited in 2014 and were still active panelists as of October 2020 could have participated in all 74 surveys, whereas the newest (2020) cohort of 1,277 active panelists had only had the opportunity to answer three surveys since they were recruited much more recently.

### American Trends Panel panelists recruited in 2014 via an RDD frame invited to up to 74 surveys

Number of panelists, recruitment sampling frame and number of panel surveys per cohort



\*Half of White non-Hispanic respondents with a bachelor's degree or higher that reported using the internet were subsampled during cohort recruitment.

Note: Graphic does not include surveys that only collect demographic profile variables or mode studies for which a portion of respondents were surveyed via the phone.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis.

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However, not every survey is created equal. All panelists are not invited to all surveys, as some surveys only require a subsample. Some panelists, even if invited, opt not to participate in a given survey. While this means that it's unlikely that any panelist actually participated in all 74 surveys, individuals who have been empaneled the longest have still been exposed to numerous surveys and questions. Panelists recruited in 2014 have taken an average of 58 surveys as of October 2020.

Some questions and topics are more susceptible to panel conditioning than others. For example, a survey about religious beliefs is unlikely to change someone's perception of God. These attitudes and beliefs are likely [well-entrenched](#) and less susceptible to change over time. However, these types of questions may also be prone to beneficial effects of panel conditioning. A respondent may not feel comfortable disclosing his/her religious identity to a relatively unknown actor. Over time, trust is developed, and a more honest report of religious identity may follow.

Regardless of the exact number of surveys or questions prone to conditioning, three things are evident. First, if panelists' attitudes and behaviors are changed after just one survey on a given topic, then even the newest (2020) cohort will be altered after just a few surveys. This is referred to as "immediate" harmful conditioning. Second, if conditioning effects are ongoing or only become more likely after being asked similar content repeatedly over time, then the oldest (2014) cohort would elicit the most biased responses while our newest (2020) cohort may still be representative of the population (all else being equal). This is referred to as "gradual" harmful conditioning. Third, the reverse may be true. Respondents may change their *reporting* immediately or gradually as they become more experienced panelists. Panel familiarity may improve data quality as respondents are more willing to report accurately. This is considered a helpful effect.

Despite the risk of conditioning (harmful or helpful), other researchers have found little, if any, cause for concern for multi-topic panels (i.e., the topic varies from survey to survey). For example, [research into the Ipsos Knowledge Panel](#) has [failed to find](#) systematic conditioning effects on measures ranging from political activism to media consumption to internet usage, and minimal differences have been identified between more- and less-tenured AmeriSpeak panelists. This study is the first effort Pew Research Center has made to explore this topic in its panel. Our results broadly comport with these prior studies.



## An experiment on the risks of panel conditioning during a presidential election

One way to test for conditioning bias is using a randomized experiment. Researchers assign a random subset of panelists to receive certain survey content, while other panel members do not receive that content. Done properly, this can isolate the effect of conditioning on panelists.

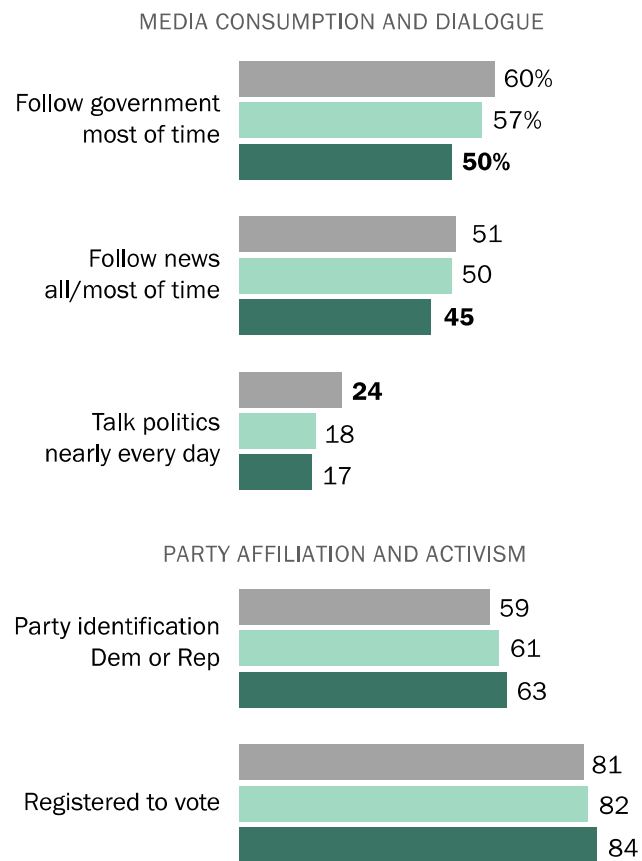
In November 2019, the Center administered a survey about news and media consumption to all ATP panelists. After the survey, respondents were divided into two random groups. One group of 1,000 individuals was not asked any more questions about news and media for 11 months while the second group of 10,855 panelists was invited to participate in six more surveys about news and media over the same time period. Then, both groups, along with a brand new cohort (2020), were invited to participate in an August 2020 survey about news and media, including some of the same questions from November 2019.

If panel conditioning occurs immediately after a participant's first survey (for better or worse), existing panelists in the group receiving similar questions infrequently should report different levels of engagement (i.e., media consumption and dialogue and voter registration) and major political party affiliation than the new recruits for whom the August 2020 survey was their first ATP survey. Higher engagement or affiliation would indicate harmful conditioning among existing panelists

## No evidence of large harmful effects of panel conditioning in 2019-2020 experiment

*% of panelists who ...*

- 2020 cohort
- Existing panelists assigned to **infrequent** ask group
- Existing panelists assigned to **frequent** ask group



Note: **Bold** values indicate a significant difference when compared with existing panelists assigned to the infrequent ask group. Customized weights were constructed to control for group differences. Estimates of voter registration are calculated only among panelists who are U.S. citizens.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of American Trends Panel survey, Aug. 3-16, 2020.

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while lower engagement or affiliation would indicate changes in reporting habits, likely a beneficial effect of conditioning.

Additionally, if panel conditioning is a gradual process based on the number of times a type of question is asked, the 10,855 respondents who were repeatedly asked about their news and media consumption should be different than the 1,000 existing panelists who received these types of questions less frequently. If panel conditioning has harmful effects (i.e., changes behavior), panelists asked about these topics frequently are expected to report higher consumption and engagement levels. By contrast, if conditioning changes how respondents report their behaviors and attitudes (i.e., helpful effects), panelists asked about these topics frequently are expected to report lower (presumably more honest) levels.

Overall, no evidence of harmful forms of conditioning was observed for any of the five variables analyzed. While the new cohort exhibited slightly lower estimates (compared with the infrequently surveyed existing panelists) in two of the five comparisons, the differences were small (2 percentage points or less) and not statistically significant. Similarly, none of the comparisons showed statistically higher estimates among the frequently surveyed existing panelists when compared with those less frequently surveyed.

Respondents who were asked more frequently about their media consumption and dialogue behaviors reported *lower* values than those asked less frequently. For example, 57% of panelists receiving fewer surveys reported following the government and current affairs “most of the time,” compared with just 50% among those who received the questions more frequently. A similar trend was observed when asked about following the news. For these variables, this change in reporting was gradual over time.

A more immediate shift was observed when respondents were asked how often they discuss politics. While no significant difference was observed between the two groups of existing panelists, there was a 6 percentage point difference between the new cohort and existing panelists assigned to the less frequent surveys group (24% vs. 18%, respectively).

While it is possible that the lower values are due to behavioral change, there is no strong theoretical reason that empanelment should reduce consumption. It may also be a harmful reporting change; panelists may be fatigued, may wish to shorten the survey, or be rushing through the survey. However, the most likely explanation is one of improved reporting. Respondents are more honest and willing to report less desirable behaviors after building trust and rapport with the Center.

Because many factors affect the likelihood of conditioning, some individuals may be more susceptible to conditioning than others. To this end, comparisons were also made by age, education and gender.<sup>1</sup> The subgroup analyses were generally consistent with the overall findings. However, not all subgroups behaved similarly. For example, 18- to 49-year-olds were statistically unaffected by empanelment when it came to reporting the frequency with which they follow the government and current affairs, whereas older individuals (both 50- to 64-year-olds and those 65 and older) exhibited a significant decline in frequency upon joining the panel. Given the different sample sizes among different subgroups, it was possible that a difference between groups appears significant for one comparison and does not reach significance for the other. Overall, similar patterns of change among the media and consumption variables were identified across groups.

Looking at the political affiliation and activism variables, there were slight harmful trends in the overall measures, but these differences failed to reach statistical significance. Similar trends were identified among most subgroups. Only women were subject to a significant, immediate shift in party identification. Specifically, the 2020 female recruits were less likely to identify with a major political party than existing panelists who were less frequently surveyed.

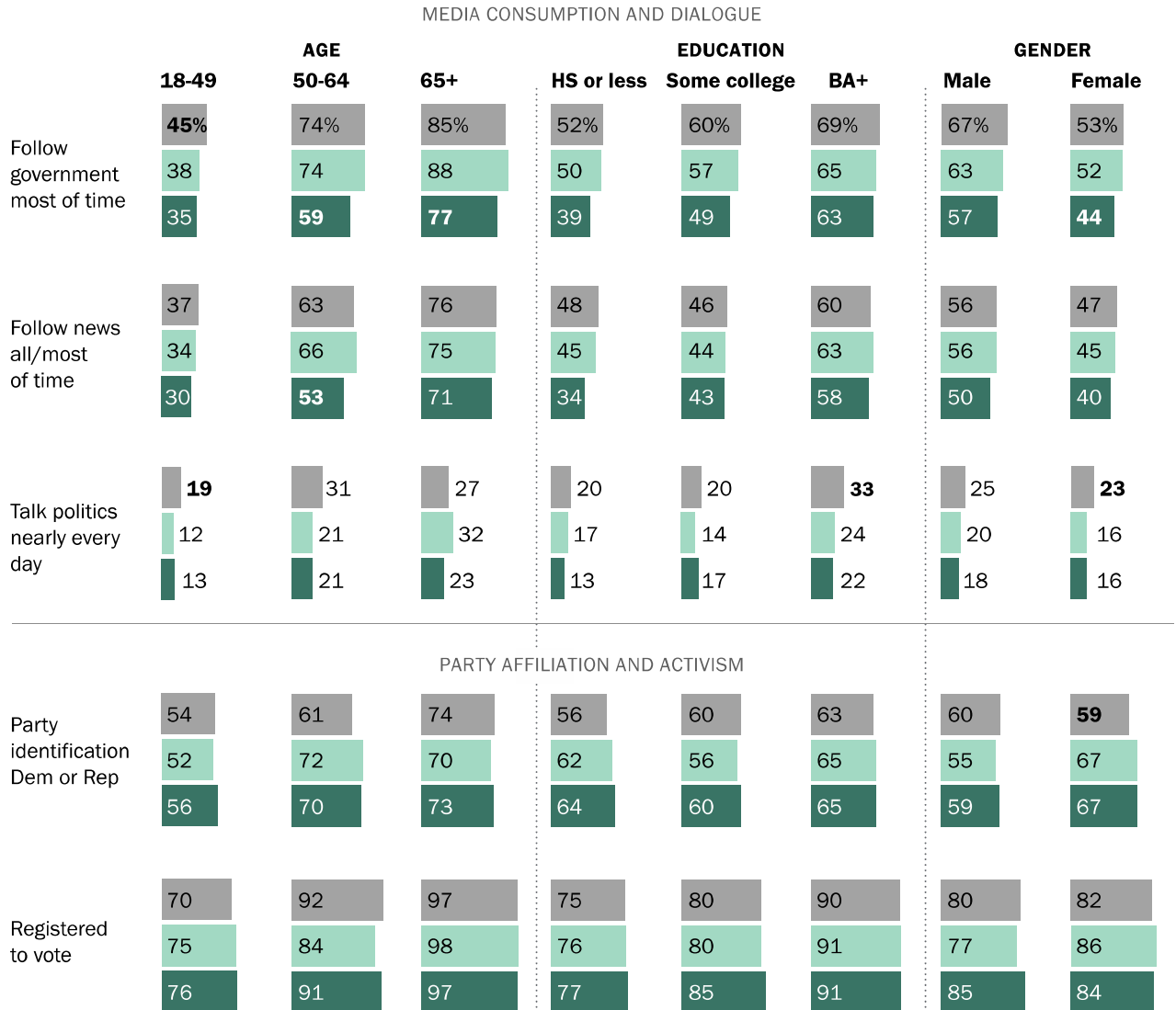
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<sup>1</sup> Other subgroups could not be analyzed due to limited sample sizes.

## Panel conditioning effects were relatively consistent across subgroups

% of panelists who ...

■ 2020 cohort ■ Existing panelists assigned to **infrequent** ask group ■ Existing panelists assigned to **frequent** ask group



Note: **Bold** values indicate a significant difference when compared with existing panelists assigned to the infrequent ask group. Customized weights were constructed to control for group differences. Estimates of voter registration are calculated only among panelists who are U.S. citizens.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of American Trends Panel survey, Aug. 3-16, 2020. "Measuring the Risks of Panel Conditioning in Survey Research"

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## Testing for conditioning in newer vs. older cohorts over time

The Center often reports on how society has changed over time. In the absence of panel conditioning (and with proper weights and attrition adjustments), any observed change over time may be considered true change. However, if panel conditioning is present, it may bias the interpretation of the data. If the conditioning effect is in the same direction as the true change, i.e., people are becoming more engaged, then change would be magnified. If the direction of conditioning and true change are opposed, the true change would be underestimated.

To determine if panel conditioning was affecting analyses of change over time, data were collected following each ATP recruitment between 2014 and 2020. If conditioning were encouraging real change among panelists, older cohorts would be expected to report higher levels of media consumption and political activism than newer cohorts at a given point in time. If this change occurred soon after recruitment, the difference could be observed between the newest cohort and all other cohorts. In other words, the newest cohort at any given time point would look like a low outlier on a graph or figure. Additionally, if conditioning changes behavior gradually over time, newer cohorts would consistently consume less media and be less engaged than older cohorts. If graphing each cohort at a given point in time, gradual behavioral change would look like a set of stairs on a column chart or an ordered line on a dot plot.

Alternatively, if conditioning causes reporting changes, improving data quality, measurement would likely be reversed. Media consumption and political activism would appear highest for the newest cohort and lowest for the oldest cohort at a given point in time.

Measurements for each cohort were compared with each other at multiple time points to assess whether any type of conditioning was occurring. This yielded 20-35 comparisons per variable across six cohorts and 4-5 time points.<sup>2</sup> The questions used in this analysis were the same as the analysis of the experiment. They included measures of frequency with which panelists follow the government, follow the news, and discuss politics as well as party identification and whether they are registered to vote.

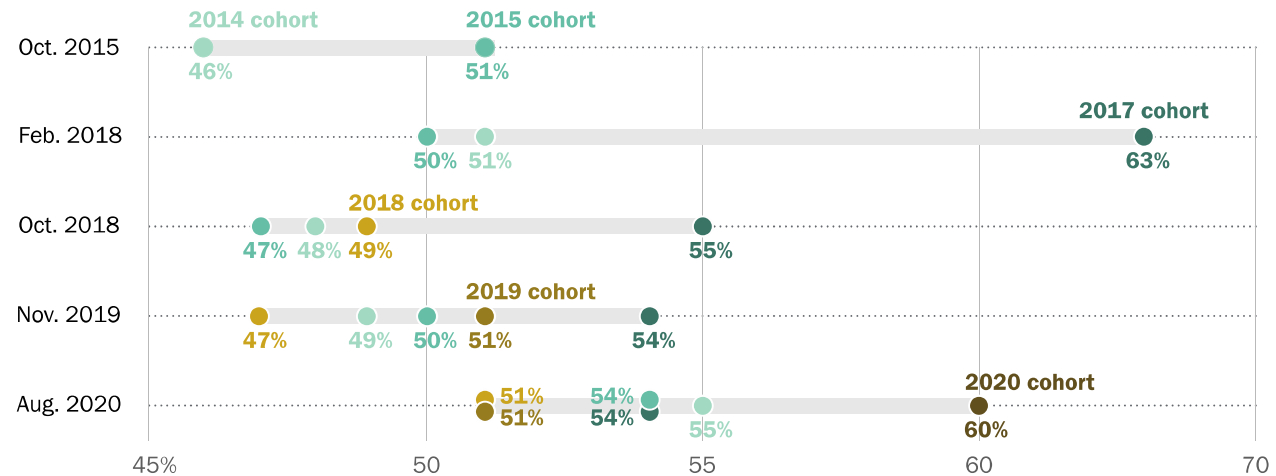
Most variables exhibited patterns consistent with the absence of panel conditioning. For example, there was no evidence of panel conditioning affecting behavioral change in the frequency with which individuals follow the government and public affairs. If conditioning yielded behavioral

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<sup>2</sup> Frequency of following the news was only measured at four time points, limiting the number of comparisons to 32. The most recent time point for political party affiliation and voter registration was not used in this analysis due to being part of the weighting, limiting the number of comparisons to 20 each.

## Longer-tenured ATP panelists do not report following what is going on in government and public affairs more frequently than new panelists

% of panelists saying that they follow government and public affairs "most of the time"



Note: Customized weights were constructed to control for cohort differences.

Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 5, 2015-April 13, 2016, Jan. 29-Feb. 13, 2018, Aug. 20-Oct. 28, 2018, Aug. 7-Nov. 30, 2019, and Aug. 3-Sept. 20, 2020.

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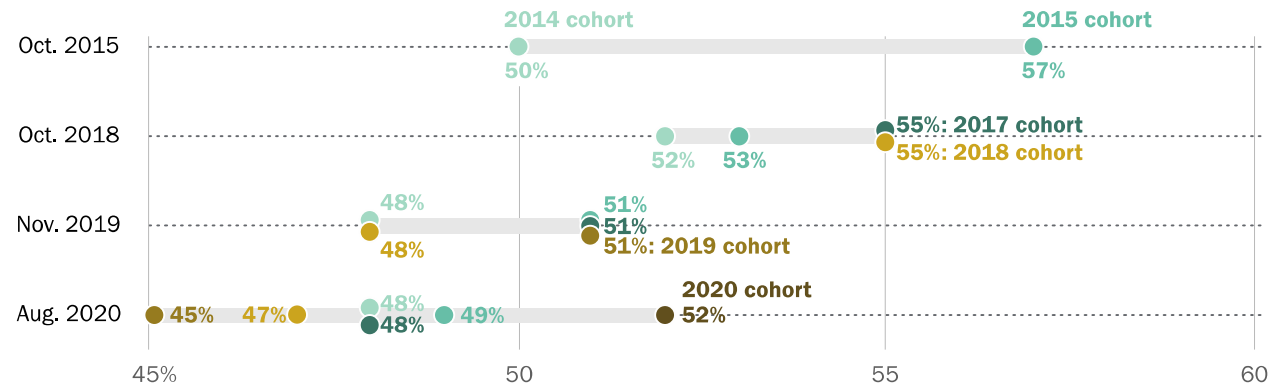
change quickly, the newest cohort would produce the lowest frequency of consumption. The newest cohort was never the lowest estimate in any of the five time points. In fact, it produced the

highest estimate in three of the time points (October 2015, February 2018 and August 2020). If conditioning was more gradual at creating behavioral change, the estimates should align in order of cohort for each time point (e.g., the 2020 cohort would have the lowest estimate in August 2020 followed by the 2019 cohort, 2018 cohort, 2017 cohort, 2015 cohort and 2014 cohort). This also did not happen. For example, in August 2020, 51% of the 2018 and 2019 cohorts reported following the government most of the time followed by the 2015 and 2017 cohorts at 54%, the 2014 cohort at 55% and the 2020 cohort at 60%.

Not only did the cohorts fail to fall into an order indicative of harmful conditioning, most of the differences among cohorts at a given time point also failed to reach significance. Twenty-nine of the 35 comparisons conducted to measure the frequency of following the government failed to reach significance. Of the remaining, all but two suggested the older cohort was following the government less often than the newer cohort. While this could indicate a change (and

## Longer-tenured ATP panelists do not report following the news more frequently than new panelists

*% of panelists saying that they follow the news “all” or “most” of the time*



Note: Customized weights were constructed to control for cohort differences.

Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted March 8-28, 2016, Jan. 29-Feb. 13, 2018, April 29-May 13, 2019, Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019, and Aug. 3-Sept. 20, 2020.

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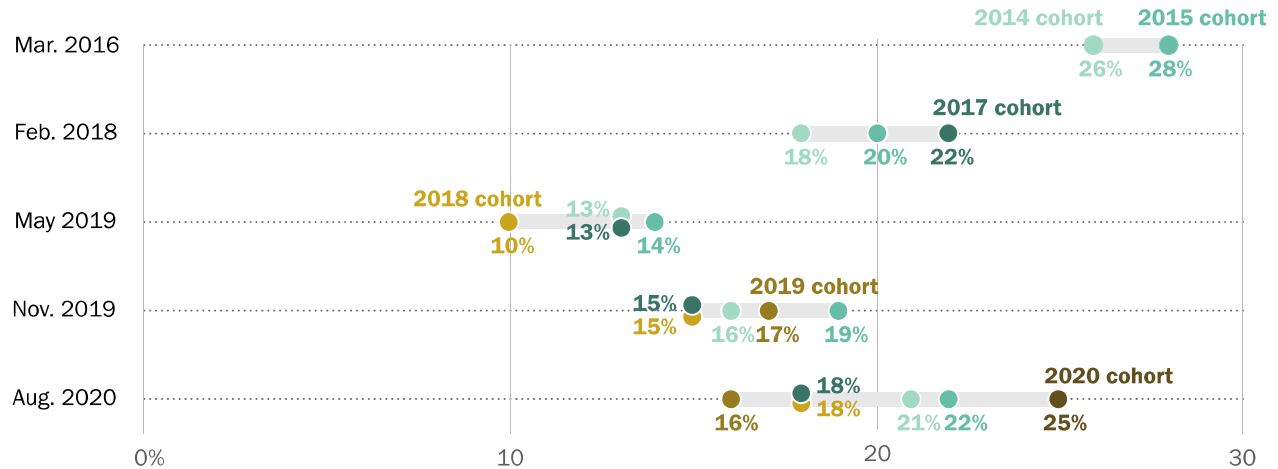
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improvement) in reporting behavior over time, the lack of a consistent trend suggests it is more likely true differences among cohorts that could not be accounted for with weights.

Other consumption and dialogue variables – frequency of following the news and discussing politics – were relatively similar to the measure of following the government. The newest cohort for a given time point never produced the lowest estimate of following the news all or most of the time. While the 2018 cohort did yield the lowest estimate of discussing politics nearly every day in May 2019, it was not statistically different from the 2017 cohort at the same point in time, and other new cohorts did not produce similar patterns. Also consistent with the lack of harmful effects was the lack of ordered estimates for any point in time and the failure of most comparisons (29 of 32 and 26 of 35 for following the news and discussing politics, respectively) to achieve statistical significance. Of those comparisons that did produce statistically significant differences, most were small and half were in the direction that suggests reporting improvements. While any change may yield slightly moderated or exaggerated results (depending on the direction of the change) in analyses of change over time, these changes are small. Luckily, for estimates that the Center publishes using the ATP, these effects are further mitigated when all of the cohorts are used.

## Longer-tenured ATP panelists do not report discussing government and politics with others more frequently than new panelists

% of panelists saying that they discuss government and politics with others "nearly every day"



Note: Customized weights were constructed to control for cohort differences.

Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted March 8-28, 2016, Jan. 29-Feb. 13, 2018, April 29-May 13, 2019, Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019, and Aug. 3-Sept. 20, 2020.

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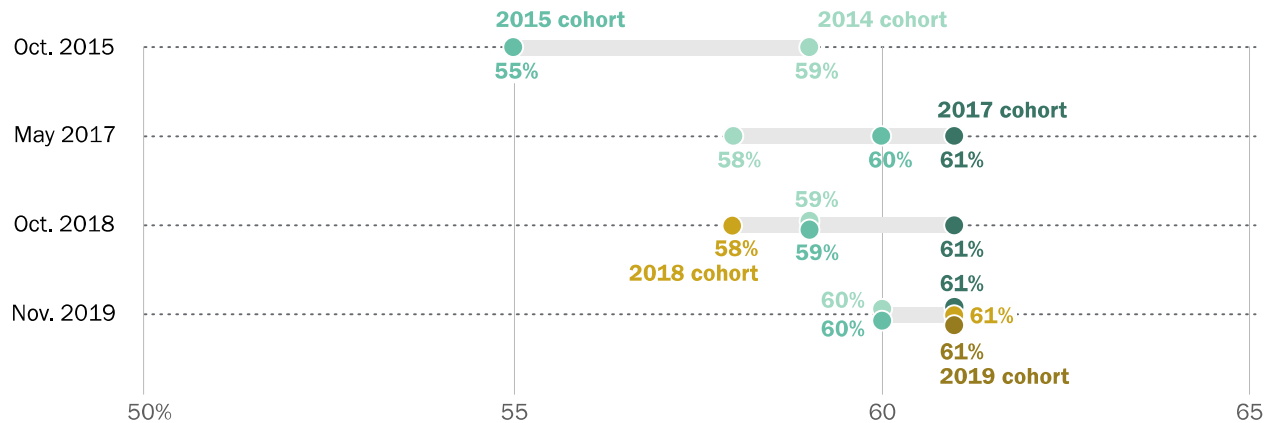
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Party identification was the least susceptible to any type of conditioning (harmful or helpful) among the variables investigated. Of the 20 comparisons made among cohorts at four different points in time, none reached statistical significance.



## Longer-tenured ATP panelists are not more likely than new panelists to self-identify with a major political party

% of panelists who identify as Democratic or Republican



Note: Customized weights were constructed to control for group differences.

Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 5, 2015-April 13, 2016, May 30-Oct. 16, 2017, Aug. 20-Oct. 28, 2018, and Aug. 7-Nov. 30, 2019.

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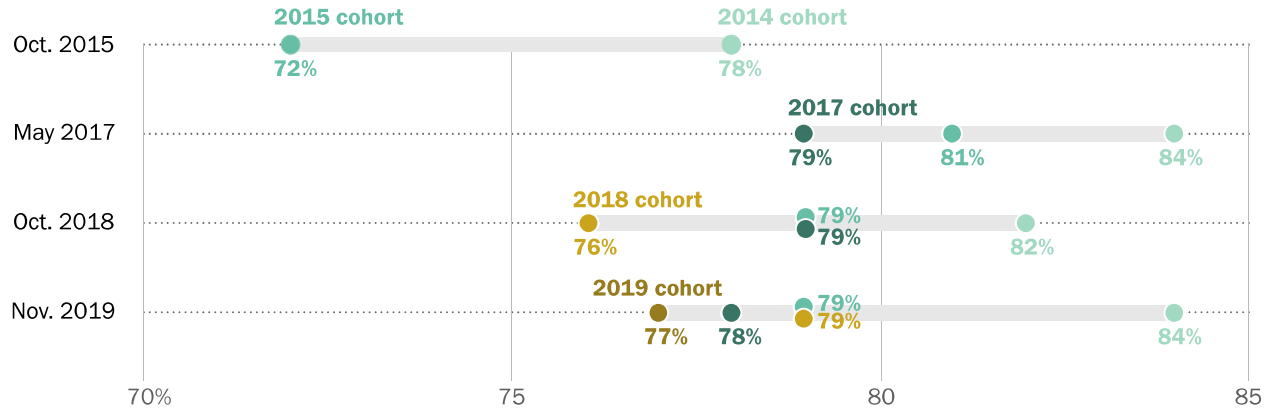
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In this set of analyses, empanelment appeared to be changing individuals' behavior in one way – it encouraged individuals to register to vote. The newest cohort consistently reported lower rates of voter registration compared with other cohorts at the same point in time. For example, in October 2018, the registration rate was 76% among panelists recruited that year, compared with 79% among the panelists recruited in 2015 and 2017 and 82% among 2014 recruits.<sup>3</sup> The panel may act as a reminder or nudge for panelists to register, causing an uptick in registration soon after empanelment. These effects are small (4-7 percentage points), and not all comparisons among the newest and older cohorts reached statistical significance. Moreover, the conditioning effects are muted when cohorts are combined to create overall estimates. Despite these mitigating factors, the consistency in pattern across all points in time for all cohorts suggests some presence of conditioning changing behavior.

<sup>3</sup> Only the difference between the 2014 and 2018 cohorts reached statistical significance in October 2018.

## Participation in the ATP modestly increases voter registration rates

% of eligible panelists self-reporting as registered to vote



Note: Customized weights were constructed to control for cohort differences.

Source: Surveys of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 5, 2015-April 13, 2016, May 30-Oct. 16, 2017, Aug. 20-Oct. 28, 2018, and Aug. 7-Nov. 30, 2019.

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In addition to the small but significant uptick in voter registration due to conditioning, these analyses also shed light on another bias in the data: the ATP overrepresents eligible voters. While the Census Bureau estimates that [67%](#)<sup>4</sup> of citizens 18 years of age or older were registered to vote

in 2018, 76%-82% of eligible ATP panelists were registered at the same point in time. This overrepresentation is not the result of conditioning. Instead, it is in part due to differential nonresponse. Of the people invited to participate in the panel, individuals who are registered to vote are more likely to respond and join the panel than eligible individuals who are not registered. The Center addresses this bias by weighting the data. However, as evidenced in these analyses, the weights do not eliminate the entire bias, and additional improvements are warranted.

<sup>4</sup> Researchers agree that this calculation artificially inflates the percent of the population that is unregistered because it includes those who were not asked or did not answer the registration question in the Voting and Registration Supplement as being unregistered.

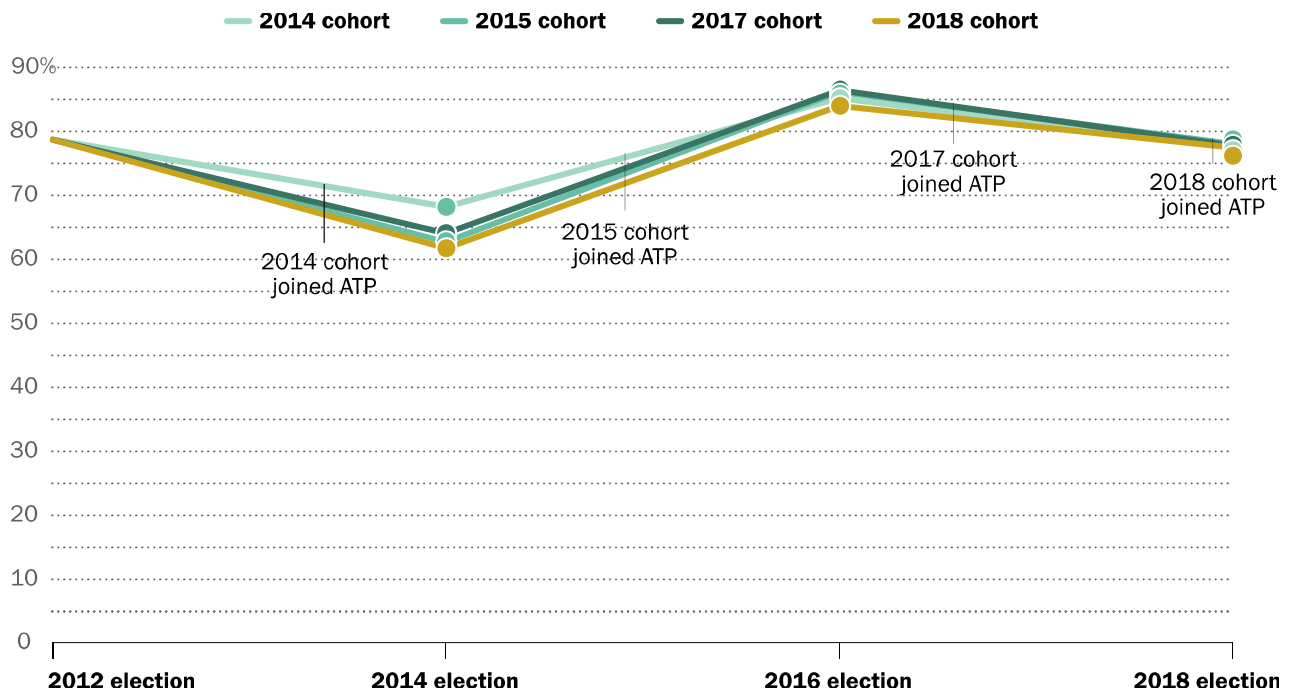
## Testing for conditioning with registered voter records

All surveys suffer from some error, so comparisons between survey estimates can conflate panel conditioning with other types of differences (e.g., measurement error, differences in recruitment methods). Researchers compared administrative data of voting before and after empanelment to further isolate panel conditioning from other differences. Specifically, Center researchers examined panelists' voter turnout histories between 2012-2018 from two [commercial voter files](#). This provided information about panelists both before and after they joined the ATP, allowing for analyses to determine whether the panel changed their behavior.

If panel conditioning changes behaviors among ATP panelists, the voter turnout among cohorts that have already joined the panel should be statistically higher than the voter turnout among

### No presence of conditioning in administrative voting records

*% of panelists who voted in election*



Note: Customized weights were constructed to control for group differences.

Source: Commercial voter files.

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cohorts that had yet to join the panel.<sup>5</sup> If change happens immediately upon joining the panel, then the observed difference should appear immediately after empanelment and hold across years. If change is ongoing, then the difference between yet-to-be-empaneled cohorts and existing cohorts should grow over time. Since administrative records only measure behavior, this analysis cannot be used to assess whether participation in the panel changes reporting over time.

With the exception of the 2014 cohort, no differences in voter turnout were observed among cohorts in any of the four observed elections. The 2014 cohort was the only cohort to have been empaneled at the time of the 2014 election. A total of 68% of the 2014 cohort voted in the 2014 election, compared with 62%-64% of the other cohorts. However, after the 2014 election, there does not appear to be any compelling evidence of panel conditioning on the ATP when measuring voter turnout. The 2014 cohort turned out to vote at similar rates to yet-to-be-empaneled cohorts in both the 2016 and 2018 elections, and no other significant differences were observed among the other cohorts.

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<sup>5</sup> Data are weighted to maximize the similarity across cohorts for the 2012 election. This weighting approach helps isolate the effect of conditioning but also results in biased point estimates. In other words, the numbers reported here are not actual turnout rates among the panelists. Attention should only focus on the differences between cohorts at a given point in time.

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This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals:

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Nick Hatley, *Research Analyst*  
Arnold Lau, *Research Analyst*

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## Methodology

### The American Trends Panel survey methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Panelists participate via self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish. The overall target population for ATP surveys is non-institutionalized persons ages 18 and older, living in the U.S., including Alaska and Hawaii. The panel is managed by Ipsos.

#### Panel recruitment

The ATP was created in 2014, with the first cohort of panelists invited to join the panel at the end of a large, national, landline and cellphone random-digit-dial survey that was conducted in both English and Spanish. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Across these three surveys, a total of 19,718 adults were invited to join the ATP, of whom 9,942 (50%) agreed to participate.

In August 2018, the ATP switched from telephone to address-based recruitment. Invitations were sent to a random, address-based sample of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

Across these three address-based recruitments, a total of 17,161 adults were invited to join the ATP, of whom 15,134 (88%) agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. In each household, the adult with the next birthday was asked to go online to complete a survey, at the end of which they were invited to join the panel. Of the 25,076 individuals who have ever joined the ATP, 13,582 remained active panelists and continued to

#### American Trends Panel recruitment surveys

Recruitment dates	Mode	Invited	Joined	Active panelists remaining
Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014	Landline/ cell RDD	9,809	5,338	2,188
Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015	Landline/ cell RDD	6,004	2,976	1,246
April 25 to June 4, 2017	Landline/ cell RDD	3,905	1,628	623
Aug. 8 to Oct. 31, 2018	ABS/web	9,396	8,778	5,910
Aug. 19 to Nov. 30, 2019	ABS/web	5,900	4,720	2,338
June 1 to July 19, 2020	ABS/web	1,865	1,636	1,277
	<b>Total</b>	<b>36,879</b>	<b>25,076</b>	<b>13,582</b>

Note: Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive surveys or who did not complete an annual profiling survey are removed from the panel. Panelists also become inactive if they ask to be removed from the panel.

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receive survey invitations at the time the most recent panel survey used in this report was conducted.

The U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File has been estimated to cover as much as 98% of the population, although some studies suggest that the coverage could be in the low 90% range.<sup>6</sup> The American Trends Panel never uses breakout routers or chains that direct respondents to additional surveys.

### **Incentives**

All respondents are offered a post-paid incentive for their participation in ATP surveys. Respondents can choose to receive the post-paid incentive in the form of a check or a gift code to Amazon.com or could choose to decline the incentive. Incentive amounts range from \$5 to \$20 depending on whether the respondent belongs to a part of the population that is harder or easier to reach. Differential incentive amounts were designed to increase panel survey participation among groups that traditionally have low survey response propensities.

### **Data quality checks**

To ensure high-quality data, the Center's researchers perform data quality checks to identify any respondents showing clear patterns of satisficing. This includes checking for very high rates of leaving questions blank, as well as always selecting the first or last answer presented. A small number of individuals were removed from each survey as a result of these checks.

### **Weighting**

A detailed description of how ATP surveys are weighted is provided [here](#). Weighting methods used to conduct the analyses found in this report are in Appendix A.

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<sup>6</sup> AAPOR Task Force on Address-based Sampling. 2016. "[AAPOR Report: Address-based Sampling](#)."

## Appendix A: Weighting for panel conditioning analyses

Two types of weights were created for the analyses found in this report.

### Weights for analyses using ATP self-reported data

The first type of weight was designed to ensure each group (e.g., cohort) was individually representative of the general

population. To accomplish this, the ATP data are weighted in a multistep process that accounts for multiple stages of sampling and nonresponse that occur at different points in the survey process. First, each panelist begins with a base weight that reflects their probability of selection for their initial recruitment survey (and the probability of being invited to participate in the panel in cases where only a subsample of respondents were invited). The base weights for panelists recruited in different years are scaled to be proportionate to the effective sample size for all active panelists in their cohort. To correct for nonresponse to the initial recruitment surveys and gradual panel attrition, the base weights for all active panelists are calibrated to align with population benchmarks identified in the accompanying table to create a full-panel weight.

### Weighting dimensions for analyses using ATP self-reported data

Variable	Benchmark source
Age x Gender	2019 American Community Survey
Education x Gender	
Education x Age	
Race/Ethnicity x Education	
Born inside vs. outside the U.S. among Hispanics and Asian Americans	
Years lived in the U.S.	
Census region x Metro/Non-metro	2019 CPS March Supplement
Volunteerism	2017 CPS Volunteering & Civic Life Supplement
Voter registration (not used for the analysis of experimental groups)	2016 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement
Party affiliation (not used for the analysis of experimental groups)	2020 National Public Opinion Reference Survey
Frequency of internet use	
Religious affiliation	

Note: Estimates from the ACS are based on non-institutionalized adults. The 2016 CPS was used for voter registration targets for this survey in order to obtain voter registration numbers from a presidential election year. Voter registration is calculated using procedures from Hur, Achen (2013) and rescaled to include the total U.S. adult population. The 2020 National Public Opinion Reference Survey featured 1,862 online completions and 2,246 mail survey completions. For per-cohort weights used in the time series analysis, Asian Americans were made part of a broader 'Other race' category as there were not enough Asian Americans in earlier cohorts.

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For ATP surveys in which only a subsample of panelists are invited to participate, a survey-specific base weight is created by adjusting the full-panel weights for subsampled panelists to account for any differential probabilities of selection for the particular panel survey. For surveys in which all



active panelists are invited to participate, the survey-specific base weight is identical to the full-panel weight.

In the final weighting step, the survey-specific base weights for panelists who completed the survey are again calibrated to match the population benchmarks specified above. For analyses that rely on individual panelists' survey responses over multiple surveys, weights are created for the unique set of respondents who participated in all specified surveys.

These weights are trimmed (typically at about the 1st and 99th percentiles) to reduce the loss in precision stemming from variance in the weights. Sampling errors and test of statistical significance take into account the effect of weighting.

For the analysis in which respondents to the November 2019 survey were divided into two random groups and then were invited to participate in a survey in August 2020 along with a newly recruited cohort, each of the three experimental groups was weighted separately to the above population benchmarks. Panelists without internet access who were provided with a tablet were excluded from the analysis altogether, as they were not eligible for selection into the group that was not asked any questions about news and media for 11 months. Since party affiliation and voter registration from the August 2020 survey were used in the analysis, these variables were not incorporated into the weighting.

For the analysis conducted at multiple time points by recruitment cohort, only panelists who responded to the August 2020 survey, the most recent survey examined in the analysis, were included. Furthermore, in order to ensure that the set of panelists being analyzed consists of those who would have been eligible to join the panel during the first recruitment back in 2014, only panelists age 24 or older were included. Each cohort was weighted separately to population benchmarks estimated using the full panel weight among the subset of panelists eligible for this analysis. Party affiliation and voter registration measured in the August 2020 survey were weighted to the benchmarks listed above. As such, the analysis does not include August 2020 as a time point for party or registration.

### **Weights for analyses of commercial voter file data**

A second type of weight was created for the analyses of the administrative data. These weights were *not* designed to create estimates representative of the general population. They were designed to maximize comparability across cohorts in 2012.

For the analysis of administrative data using commercial voter files, panelists were matched to a commercial voter file by a vendor. Only panelists that were members of the first four ATP recruitment surveys were included. This group consists of the Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014, Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015, and April 25 to June 4, 2017, recruitments that were conducted via RDD and the Aug. 8 to Oct. 31, 2018, recruitment that was conducted via ABS. Within this group, only panelists that completed surveys via the internet, were US citizens and registered voters and were age 24 or older at the time of analysis were included.

Weights for this analysis were not calibrated to population benchmarks to be representative of the U.S. at large but instead were calibrated so that each recruitment group resembled one another. First, each panelist begins with a base weight that reflects their probability of selection for their initial recruitment survey (and the probability of being invited to participate in the panel in cases where only a subsample of respondents were invited). The base weights for panelists recruited in different years are scaled to be proportionate to the effective sample size for all active panelists in their cohort. The three RDD recruitments were grouped and averaged together respective to each recruitment's base weights (the first stage of weighting reflects each panelists probability of selection) to create weighting dimensions for voting in the 2012 election and a number of demographic, household, and attitudinal measures. Then, each cohort was weighted separately to these dimensions. For this analysis, weights were not trimmed to ensure that different recruitments were represented equally along these dimensions.

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## Weighting dimensions for analyses using commercial voter file data

### Variable

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Voted in 2012 election

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Age x gender

Education x gender

Education x age

Race/ethnicity x education

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Number of adults in household

Number of kids in household

Length of time in current home

Own or rent current home

Employment status

Has a disability or handicap

---

Gun ownership

Union membership

---

Census region x metro/non-metro

Census division

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Volunteerism

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Note: For per-cohort weights used in the time series analysis, Asian Americans were made part of a broader 'Other race' category as there were not enough Asian Americans in earlier cohorts.

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Recruitment	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014	2,272	2.3 percentage points
Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015	1,249	3 percentage points
April 25 to June 4, 2017	649	4.7 percentage points
Aug. 8 to Oct. 31, 2018	7,159	1.3 percentage points

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