Schmollers Jahrbuch 134 (2014), 487 – 506
Duncker & Humblot, Berlin

The European Social Survey: Contents, Design, and Research Potential

By Christian Schnaudt, Michael Weinhardt,
Rory Fitzgerald, and Stefan Liebig

1. Introduction

Following its establishment in 2001, the academically led European Social Survey (ESS) has become one of the most important and informative resources concerning a broad variety of European populations' moral, religious, social, economic and political attitudes and behaviours. In addition to its primary goal of tracking changes and stability in European citizens' attitudes and behaviours, the ESS project also devotes itself to the development and dissemination of advanced standards in survey research. In particular, this applies to questionnaire design, cross-national equivalence of the instruments used and the sampling procedures applied (Jowell et al., 2007; Kohler, 2007; 2008). Designed as a biennial survey in its original blueprint[1], the ESS has by now been conducted in more than 30 European countries and currently offers data from the first six waves of the survey (2002 – 2012), including information and answers of approximately 300,000 respondents in total (at the time of writing, fieldwork for the seventh wave of the ESS has just been completed). Its integration of a variety of socially relevant topics, broad coverage of European countries and a growing number of time points make the ESS an increasingly suitable data source for single-country as well as cross-national analyses with time-series analysis now starting to become feasible. For policy makers and scholars from various disciplines and fields of interest alike, the ESS therefore provides a unique and innovative resource on the (changing) social, political and economic conditions in Europe at the outset of the 21st century.

Between 2002 and 2012, funding for the ESS has been secured from the European Commission's Framework Programmes, the European Science Foundation, and national funding agencies in the respective participating countries. Since 2013, the ESS has been granted the status of a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC) in which member countries bound themselves

[1] For further details see: http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/about/ESS_blueprint.pdf [last accessed 2015 / 03 / 26].

legally to financing two additional waves of the survey, thus contributing further to the long-term prospects of the ESS project. The Members additionally agreed to replace the Commission in funding the central costs of coordination and agreed to underwrite the new organisation from a legal and financial perspective. The host country for ESS ERIC is the UK. With regard to its organisational arrangements, the ESS ERIC is overseen by a General Assembly consisting of national representatives from each of the Member and Observer countries, with three standing committees (scientific advisory board, methods advisory board, finance committee). The General Assembly appoints the ESS ERIC Director who acts as the legal representative and chief executive of ESS ERIC and is responsible for the management of the organisation.[2] In order to ensure the effective scientific organisation of the project, the Director is supported by a team at the Head Quarters (HQ) and also appoints a Core Scientific Team (CST). The overall design and implementation of the ESS work programme are therefore coordinated under the aegis of the ESS ERIC Director in collaboration with six partner institutions and universities, which together constitute the ESS HQ-CST. Planning and realisation of the fieldwork within each of the participating countries lie within the responsibility of the national ESS teams under the guidance of the respective national coordinators (NCs). An overview of the coverage of countries across the first seven waves of the ESS is shown in table 1 (countries marked with an asterisk are ESS ERIC Member countries).

The aim of this article is to provide a systematic overview and assessment of the contents, design and research potential of the ESS. To this end, section 2 outlines the contents of the first seven waves of the ESS, designates exemplary research designs and questions to be analysed with the individual- and contextual-level data provided by the ESS project, and provides information on how to obtain access to the ESS data. Section 3 highlights the methodology employed by the ESS, giving particular emphasis to questionnaire design and development, sampling procedures, as well as fieldwork, data collection, and data processing. To exemplify the practical implications and challenges of applying the ESS methodology, section 4 presents a detailed account of the contents and implementation of the ESS in Germany. Section 5 contains information about additional resources connected with the ESS, such as the ESS EduNet online tutorials or the ESS Bibliography. Finally, section 6 summarises the most important aspects of the ESS and highlights its research potential in comparison with other data sources.

[2] Mr Rory Fitzgerald, ESS ERIC Headquarters, City University London, UK.

Table 1

Coverage of European Countries Across the First Seven Waves of the ESS; 2002 – 2014

	ESS 1 (2002)	ESS 2 (2004)	ESS 3 (2006)	ESS 4 (2008)	ESS 5 (2010)	ESS 6 (2012)	ESS 7 (2014)
Albania						✓	
Austria*	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Belgium*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bulgaria		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Croatia				✓	✓		
Cyprus			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Czech Republic*	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Denmark	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Estonia*		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Finland	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
France*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Germany*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greece	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Hungary	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Iceland		✓				✓	
Ireland*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Israel	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Italy	✓	✓				✓	
Kosovo						✓	
Latvia			✓	✓			✓
Lithuania*				✓	✓	✓	✓
Luxembourg	✓	✓					
Netherlands*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Norway	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Poland*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Portugal*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Romania			✓	✓			
Russian Federation			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Slovakia		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Slovenia*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spain	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sweden*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Switzerland	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Turkey		✓		✓			
Ukraine		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
United Kingdom*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

2. Data: Contents and Documentation, Coverage, Access

This section outlines and discusses the substantive topics and contents of the ESS data and their implementation across different waves of the survey. In this context, attention will first be given to the individual-level data of the ESS. Additionally, information about the contextual data provided by the ESS (multilevel and event reporting / media claims data) and how to access the data will be given, too.

2.1 Individual-level Data

The individual-level data of the ESS is at the heart of the project. The ESS main questionnaire consists of (1) *core modules*, that cover a variety of topics which are repeated (mostly unchanged) in every wave of the survey[3], and (2) *rotating modules* that are focused on more specific topics. The topics of the rotating modules result from a competition announced in the Official Journal of the European Union which includes the possibility to apply for a new module or to (partially) repeat an existing module. As such, the rotating modules provide multi-national academic research teams with a unique opportunity to include up to thirty items on their primary topic of interest in the main questionnaire of the ESS.

Table 2 provides an overview of the topics and contents covered by the first seven waves of the ESS.[4] As can be seen, the core modules comprise topics that are of enduring interest for most researchers in the social sciences (and beyond). Their regular inclusion in all rounds of the ESS allows to keep track of possible changes in European citizens' economic, social, political as well as religious and moral attitudes and behaviours. As such, the core modules contain information on, *inter alia*, European citizens' TV and newspaper use, trust in fellow citizens and political institutions, political interest, political participation, satisfaction (with life, government, the economy, or health and education systems), religious denomination and church attendance, citizenship, background and status (age, gender, education, legal marital / partnership status, employment status) as well as the structure and composition of their private environment (household size and income, education and employment status of partner and parents).[5]

---

3 For example, over the course of the several ESS rounds, certain items concerning respondents' radio or newspaper consumption and political efficacy have been dropped from the core modules, whilst new items will be added in Round 8 on a variety of topics.

4 At the time of publication, only data for the first six waves of the ESS (2002 – 2012) is available.

5 For a complete overview of the respective items included in each of the six core modules, please refer to the data documentation and questionnaires as provided by the

Table 2

Contents and Coverage of the European Social Survey, 2002 – 2014

	ESS 1 (2002)	ESS 2 (2004)	ESS 3 (2006)	ESS 4 (2008)	ESS 5 (2010)	ESS 6 (2012)	ESS 7 (2014)
(1) Core modules							
Media and social trust	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Politics	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gender, year of birth, and household grid	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Subjective well-being, social exclusion, religion, national and ethnic identity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Socio demographics	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Human values	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
(2) Rotating modules							
Immigration	✓						✓
Citizen involvement	✓						
Health and care seeking		✓					
Economic morality		✓					
Family, work and well-being		✓			✓		
Timing of life			✓				
Personal and social well-being			✓			✓	
Welfare attitudes				✓			
Ageism				✓			
Justice					✓		
Democracy						✓	
Health							✓

During the first seven waves of the ESS, there have been a total of twelve different rotating modules with specific thematic foci. Each of them will be briefly presented in order to provide an impression of the research questions that might be tackled with the data.[6] The first rotating module on immigration,

ESS project team (see http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data [last accessed 2015-02-24]).

[6] For a complete description and overview of the items included in each of the twelve rotating modules that have been incorporated into the different waves of the ESS, please refer to the data documentation, questionnaires, and respective research proposals for each module as provided by the ESS project team (see http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/module-index.html [last accessed 2015-03-26]).

first fielded in 2002 and (partly) repeated in 2014, is concerned with citizens' views and evaluations of migration, citizens' attitudes towards migrants, and citizens' views about the effects of migration. As such, the rotating module covers, *inter alia*, questions on the origins of migrants, which qualifications they should exhibit in order to be allowed to resettle, and whether immigration is generally considered a positive or negative development. The second rotating module on citizen involvement (2002 only) is located around the topics of civil society, social capital, and social participation. Therefore, it contains a broad battery on citizens' involvement in voluntary associations, personal networks, and images of how a good citizen should act in society. The third rotating module is concerned with varying structures and cultures with regard to health and care seeking (2004 only) across European countries. It includes questions on health and illness perceptions, medication, as well as the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients. A fourth rotating module on economic morality (2004 only) is preoccupied with the normative underpinnings of markets in times of growing globalisation and neo-liberal policies. The questions in this module primarily refer to clients' expectations towards producers and service providers and citizens' evaluations of practices like bribery and black labour. The fifth rotating module on family, work and well-being (2004 and 2010) aims to provide information on the compatibility of work and family. Accordingly, it contains a broad variety of questions on citizens' conditions at and satisfaction with work as well as their perceived work-life balance. The sixth rotating module headed 'timing of life' (2006 only) deals with the question of how European citizens plan the course of their lives and which options they see to influence their life courses. Questions in this module, amongst others, pertain to the ideal age for marriage or retirement and whether citizens try to make specific plans for different steps in their life course. A seventh rotating module focuses on the personal and social well-being of European citizens (2006 and 2012). Question items in this module concern respondents' evaluations of their own happiness and freedom of choice as well as their judgements of how fellow citizens treat them in their daily encounters. The eighth rotating module on welfare attitudes (2008 only) is positioned within the broader discussion about welfare state retrenchment and welfare state reform. Broadly conceived, this module contains questions about the standard of living of different societal groups and the provision and effects of as well as the eligibility criteria for social benefits and services. Ageism constitutes the topic of a ninth rotating module in the ESS (2008 only) which is concerned with various age related perceptions, prejudices and stereotypes of European citizens. Hence, most questions ask respondents about their perceptions and views of people at different ages, which qualities are typical for people of different age groups (e.g., friendly, tidy, envious, etc.), and whether they themselves have been subject of any age related discrimination. The tenth rotating module on justice (2010 only) is occupied with citizens' views of the criminal justice system, in particular with the courts and the police. As such, it includes questions on the legitimacy of and trust in these institutions as well as

citizens' likelihood of cooperation and compliance with the courts and the police. Finally, the eleventh rotating module that has so far been included in the ESS deals with the broad topic of democracy (2012 only). All questions in this module pertain to citizens' ideal images of what democracy should look like as well as their evaluations of how it works in practice.[7] For the last remaining rotating module on health (2014 only), data will be available from October 2015. This module is concerned with the topic of health (inequalities) and contains a broad variety of questions on health related behaviours (consumption of fruit or alcohol), medical prescriptions, as well as actual health problems and their effects on the daily routine.

This brief depiction of the various contents and topics covered by the first seven waves of the ESS highlights the multi-faceted research potential as made available through the data. While the time-series design of the core modules increasingly enables researchers to investigate and track developments and changes in key social, economic, and political attitudes as well as behaviours of European citizens across countries *and* over time, the various contents and topics of the rotating modules constitute a valuable cross-national resource for those researchers who are interested in more specific topics affecting European countries at the outset of the 21st century.

2.2 Contextual Data

The research potential of the ESS individual-level data is further enhanced by the collection and dissemination of contextual data, consisting of (1) multilevel data made available by the ESS project and (2) ESS event reporting / media claims data.

The ESS multilevel data allows analysts to combine the individual-level data with additional information about the context, i.e. the respective region and country, respondents live in. This combination of data from different levels enables researchers to analyse whether cross-national differences with regard to individual-level attitudes and behaviours are purely individual in nature or emanate from different characteristics of the context respondents from different countries and regions live in. At the country-level, the ESS multilevel data depository currently contains information about a country's demography (e.g., population size and density), economy (e.g., GDP per capita, unemployment rate), education (e.g., enrolment rates at different educational levels), political institutions (e.g., cabinet composition, voter turnout), health (e.g., life expectancy, health expenditures), crime (e.g., homicide rate, corruption), as well as

[7] Key findings from this module have been presented to the European Parliament on March 4th 2015, highlighting the importance and practical implications of the ESS data for European policy makers as well as academics.

some composite measures (e.g., human development index). At the regional level, corresponding data is available for most of the areas mentioned above as well. The regional level information is organised along and available for the NUTS (Nomenclature des unités territoriales statistiques) and LAU (Local Administrative Units) classifications.

A second type of contextual data to enrich the research potential of the ESS individual-level data is available in form of the ESS event reporting / media claims data (see Stoop / Fernee / Harrison, 2012; ESS, 2013, 27). In most general terms, event reporting (ESS waves 1–5) and media claims coding (beginning with ESS wave 6) aim to collect information about events and media contents that might impact on respondents' answers during the ESS data collection process. As such, they may cover national elections, international conflicts, political scandals, significant changes in national laws, instances of crime, or economic recessions. Similar to the ESS multilevel data for countries and regions, the event reporting / media claims data can be used to investigate whether variation in individual-level attitudes or behaviours across countries are solely individual in nature or whether these are affected by the occurrence of such events (or the reporting thereof in the media) in some but not other countries.[8]

To illustrate the overall research potential of the individual and contextual ESS data with the help of a concrete example, we can think of three different research designs to investigate the relationship between (perceptions of) economic performance and trust in political institutions. The baseline hypothesis in such a scenario would be that better (evaluations of) economic performance lead(s) to higher trust in political institutions. In a first, purely individual-level research design utilising the ESS individual data only, we would simply investigate whether individuals' perceptions of economic performance exert a positive impact on individuals' trust in political institutions. In a second research design combining the ESS individual and contextual level data, we could, for example, examine whether individuals living in countries with a relatively higher GDP per capita exhibit higher levels of trust in political institutions than individuals living in countries with a comparatively lower GDP per capita. Finally, in a third type of research design that combines the ESS individual and contextual data with the help of so called cross-level interactions, we could investigate whether the impact of individuals' evaluations of economic performance on their trust in political institutions is of different strength across countries with a varying GDP per capita. With the (increasing) availability of different waves of the ESS over time, it is clear that for all three research designs a

[8] For a more detailed overview of the ESS event reporting / media claims data, please refer to the ESS event reporting guidelines and ESS media claims guidelines as provided by the ESS project team (see http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/measuring_national_context.html [last accessed 2015-02-24]). See also Stoop / Fernee / Harrison (2012).

comparison of the relationships over time can be easily added to the analysis. In particular, this latter aspect applies to the data of the core modules which have been repeated across all waves of the ESS.

2.3 Data Access

The ESS individual and contextual data as well as all further documentation material, guidelines and project specifications are hosted by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). To access the data, a free registration (providing personal and institutional information of the user) on the European Social Survey website is required. After registration, each user has access to the complete ESS data of different waves (currently the first six waves from 2002 to 2012) either via a download option or an online analysis feature. Downloads for each wave are available in different formats (SAS, SPSS, Stata). If users are interested in a subset of the data, utilising only certain variables, waves or countries, the official ESS website provides a cumulative data wizard enabling users to compile customised data sets specifically tailored for their individual needs and purposes. The online analysis feature offers the possibility to conduct certain analyses (cross-tabulations, correlations, OLS regression) via an online-interface without the necessity to download the data. This option is especially helpful for users who do not have access to own statistical software packages. As for the individual-level data, the ESS multilevel data (only starting from wave 4 in 2008) as well as the ESS event reporting / media claims data (only Excel and SPSS formats) are available for download on the official ESS website (www.europeansocialsurvey.org).

3. Methodology

In order to ensure the highest level of quality, comparability, and representativeness possible for the data coming from a very diverse group of European countries, the ESS CST together with the NCs, Methods Advisory Board and Scientific Advisory Board have introduced a wide-ranging set of standards and measures that have to be met with regard to (1) the design and development of the ESS questionnaires, (2) the sampling procedures, as well as (3) fieldwork, data collection, and data processing.

3.1 Questionnaire Design and Development

Regarding the design and development of the questionnaire (for a general overview see ESS, 2001), the most important step to warrant comparability and equivalence of the questions across a diverse set of countries, after the question

development itself, is effective translation (see Dorer, 2012a; 2012b; ESS, 2013, 19–20). For that purpose, the ESS project specification and translation guidelines include a detailed four-step process consisting of translation, verification, survey quality predictor (SQP) coding, and national pre-testing. The ESS source questionnaire is formulated in British English, then each of the participating countries have to make sure that the questionnaire is translated into any language that is spoken as a first language by five per cent or more of its population. In this context, the translation process itself follows the so called TRAPD (Translation, Review, Adjudication, Pre-testing, Documentation) procedure (see Harkness, 2003; 2007; Dorer, 2012a, 7–10). This procedure involves an interactive process between translators, reviewers, and adjudicators – usually with diverse skills in linguistics, survey research and social science in general – in which the English master questionnaire is translated, pre-tested, and necessary changes are documented.[9] Once the adjudicator has approved a version of the translated questionnaire, it is subject to further linguistic checking (verification) by external experts and service providers outside the infrastructure of the ESS project itself (see Dorer, 2012a, 17; Dorer et al., 2012). Following translation and verification, selected items from the main and supplementary questionnaire are subject to SQP coding. SQP coding analyses the consistency in the formal structure of the translated questions in comparison with the original version of the English source questionnaire. It thus aims at avoiding unnecessary deviations in the formal structure of the source and translated versions of a question that might hamper the cross-national comparability of the items used (see Dorer, 2012a, 18–19; ESS, 2013, 19–20). In addition, SQP coding is further employed to gather information on formal deviations between original questions in the main questionnaire and test questions from the supplementary questionnaire. These slightly modified versions of the original questions, substituting certain terms in the question wording or using different measurement scales, aim to assess the reliability and validity of the questions administered in the main survey. In combination with an analysis of the deviations in respondents' answers to the original and test questions, SQP coding thus provides an additional means for the reduction and correction of measurement error (see also ESS, 2013, 18–19). To date, the ESS is the only cross-national survey using SQP coding in order to check and improve the validity, reliability and equivalence of translated survey items across countries (ESS, 2012a). After completion of translation, verification and SQP coding, a final run of pre-tests at the national level is conducted in order to assess and verify whether the individual steps of the data collection process are properly functioning as outlined in the project specifications (see ESS, 2013, 15).

9 For countries sharing a common language (e.g., German in the case of Austria, Germany and Switzerland), an additional step includes the comparison and adjustment of potentially varying translations across these countries (see Dorer, 2012a, 11–13).

3.2 Sampling Procedures

A second set of standards and measures incorporated into the design of the ESS, mainly with the objective of securing representativeness and equivalent samples across the countries included, refers to the sampling procedures applied (see ESS, 2012b; 2013, 21–23). The sampling designs for each of the participating countries in the ESS are developed by the ESS Sampling Expert Panel (SEP) in cooperation with the NCs and rely on random probability samples at all stages of the selection process. In recent waves, the ESS data has been based on various sample designs, including stratified random samples, multi-stage random samples as well as combinations thereof. Quota sampling as well as substitution of non-responding individuals or households are not allowed in any part of the ESS sample design. Across all countries, sampling frames for the selection of individuals may be based on administrative lists of individuals, households, or addresses, depending on the availability of these lists in the respective countries. Accordingly, sample designs in the ESS may vary across countries and appropriate measures have to be implemented in order to make estimates from different countries as comparable as possible.

To allow for design based inference, full coverage of the target population, high response rates, and an equal minimum effective sample size across all countries are required. Only if the sample is representative of the target population, non-response is sufficiently low (or random), and the minimum effective sample size across countries is adequate, estimates of interest are unbiased and also comparable across countries so that reliable inferences can be drawn (see ESS, 2012a, 2–6; Koch et al., 2012, 1; Koch et al., 2014, 2). The target population of the ESS is defined in the same way in all countries, namely all individuals of at least 15 years of age living permanently in a private household. All individuals fulfilling these criteria have to have a known and non-zero probability of being included in the sample. Individuals' language, citizenship or nationality are not relevant criteria. With respect to the intended response rates, the ESS aims for a fixed goal of 70% (the response rate being defined as the number of completed interviews divided by the total number of selected individuals, households, or addresses net from ineligibles). In some countries, however, such a relatively high response rate is yet hard to obtain. Therefore, whenever reliable information about the expected rate of non-response is available, this information is used in the ESS sample design to adjust the gross sample size of primary sampling units (PSU) to ensure that the intended minimum effective sample size within each country is reached (1,500 for countries with more than 2 million inhabitants, 800 otherwise). Still, in order to keep the effects of the sample design as small as possible (and thus the gross number of interviews needed to reach the minimum effective sample size), all ESS sample designs aim to reduce the number of interviews per PSU and to keep the variation in selection probabilities across all individuals of the target population low (see ESS, 2012a, 4–5). For any remaining design effects, the ESS data contains

design and post-stratification weights to adjust for biases emanating from the sampling procedure, different sample designs across countries, and differential response on key stratifiers such as gender, age, education level and region. The final sample design for each of the countries included in the ESS has to be documented in detail (e.g., description of the target population, the sampling frame and units, stratification details, calculations for the effective sample size, design effects and response rates) by the respective NCs and signed off by the SEP prior to the beginning of fieldwork and data collection. This strategy seeks to ensure that each country relies on a comparable probability sample of the target population and that estimates of interest stemming from different countries and sample designs exhibit minimum bias and maximum comparability.

3.3 Fieldwork, Data Collection, and Data Processing

A third set of standards and measures aiming to improve the quality and representativeness of the ESS data is directly tied to fieldwork, data collection, and data processing (see Koch et al., 2012). Ultimately, advanced and innovative standards concerning questionnaire design and development as well as sampling procedures can become meaningless if data collection and data processing are compromised. Therefore, the ESS fieldwork regulations for the data collection process contain several standardised guidelines and rules that have to be followed by each of the participating countries and the respective interviewers. These include a common fieldwork period of four months in all countries (usually starting in September and lasting until the end of December), an intended interview length of not more than 60 minutes in British English for the completion of the main and supplementary questionnaires, the implementation of standardised interviewing, target response and non-contact rates of 70% and 30% respectively, as well as the exclusive use of personal, face-to-face interviews (PAPI or CAPI at respondents' homes) for the ESS main questionnaire. The application of telephone interviews is not permitted at any stage when administering the ESS main questionnaire whilst self-completion is permitted only for the supplementary questionnaire. To achieve a high level of consistency of the interviews across different countries, the ESS relies on harmonised briefing materials for all interviewers including all relevant information on how the interview process has to be organised and carried out (see Koch et al., 2012, 3 – 6; Matsuo et al., 2012a). All interviewers are required to receive personal briefings prior to fieldwork. What is more, all interviews should ideally be conducted by trained interviewers with prior experience in face-to-face surveys and used to working with random samples. In order to prevent possibly damaging effects on the quality of the interviews which might result from symptoms of fatigue on the side of the interviewers, the maximum number of scheduled sample units per interviewer is limited to 48. Finally, the ESS fieldwork regulations also include certain control and monitoring meas-

ures to oversee the quality of the data collection process and the interviews conducted. These quality checks are usually administered by the NCs and mainly refer to fieldwork progress and interviewer performance. Amongst other things, these include the monitoring of interview time, response rates for different interviewers, whether interviewers followed the instructions as specified in the interviewer briefings, and whether non-respondents or ineligibles have been contacted by the interviewers at all (see ESS, 2013, 26 – 27).

Next to the above mentioned standards and measures that aim to guarantee the quality of fieldwork itself, the data collection process contains further arrangements directed at improving response rates and thus the representativeness of the data from current and even future waves of the ESS (see Koch et al., 2012, 6 – 11; ESS 2013, 26). These arrangements imply that interviewers undertake at least four personal attempts to establish contact with a respective sample unit, which have to be at different times, different days, one in the evening, one at the weekend and distributed over a minimum of two weeks. In addition, for each contact (attempt), interviewers have to complete so called 'contact forms' in which they provide additional information on the result of their contact attempts as well as the demographics, likelihood of future cooperation, and residential area of initially refusing respondents (see Matsuo et al., 2012b). These interviewer-based evaluations, in combination with short surveys of non-respondents and further details about the interviewers themselves, provide valuable information about the likely reasons for non-participation in the ESS. These recursive elements implemented in the design of the data collection process also help to inform future waves of the ESS by providing additional insights on how to possibly avoid non-response and how to improve and adjust sampling procedures (see Matsuo et al. 2010; Matsuo / Loosveldt, 2013).

Following fieldwork and data collection, the data is processed by the ESS Archives at the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). NCs are responsible for providing the ESS Archives with the agreed upon deliverables (data and documentation files) which have to correspond with the specifications outlined in the ESS Data Protocol (see ESS, 2013, 28). The ESS Archives administer draft versions of the national data sets which, after additional validity checks by the respective NCs, are incorporated into a first integrated international ESS data file. Prior to data dissemination, the national data provided by each of the participating countries is subject to further quality assessments by the ESS HQ-CST. These quality checks assess whether there have been any indications of non-compliance concerning the implementation of the official ESS standards and procedures with regard to questionnaire development, data collection and the provision of deliverables (for a detailed overview see ESS, 2013, 30). In case one of the participating countries did not comply with the official ESS standards and procedures, the ESS HQ-CST may issue a decision to not include this country's data into the official ESS integrated data file.

These rigorous quality assessments concerning data processing thus help to further ensure the quality and comparability of the official ESS data.

4. Practical Implications and Challenges: The ESS in Germany

To exemplify the general standards and procedures underlying the methodology of the ESS, but also to illustrate some of the challenges involved, we briefly discuss the contents and implementation of the ESS in Germany. Germany has participated in all seven ESS rounds so far and participation in round eight is planned as well. The administration of the German ESS study is led and organised by the national coordinating team (NCT), consisting of four academics from the social and political sciences with experience and background knowledge in survey research and methodology.[10] The NCT is assisted by one survey manager who is responsible for day-to-day project management. The first seven rounds of the ESS received funding from the German Research Foundation (DFG). In late 2013 Germany became a founder member of the newly established ESS ERIC, thereby supporting the institutionalisation of the ESS as a research infrastructure at the European level.

The contents of the ESS in Germany correspond largely with the general contents of the ESS outlined in section 2. Due to the above-average interview length (see below), the opportunity to include country-specific questions has been largely limited to five items exploring the internal migration history between East and West Germany. In the first two waves, these were supplemented by additional items evaluating citizens' current living conditions in comparison to the time before German unification. In waves two, three, and four (2004 – 2008), the German ESS also repeated several questions on social participation, good citizenship, ideal images of society, and respondents' political efficacy, which had not been part of the standard ESS questionnaire at that time.[11] As this overview of some of the additional country-specific items shows, the German study of the ESS may establish a supplemental resource if one is interested

[10] In wave seven, the German Coordinating Team consisted of Prof. Stefan Liebig (National Coordinator Round 7, Bielefeld University), Prof. Jan W. van Deth (University of Mannheim), Prof. Edeltraud Roller (University of Mainz), and Prof. Sigrid Roßteutscher (University of Frankfurt am Main). Former members of the NCT were Oscar Gabriel (University of Stuttgart) and Heiner Meulemann (University of Cologne). For further details of the ESS in Germany, please refer to the website: www.europeansocialsurvey.de.

[11] For further details on the additional country-specific items that have been included in the German study of the ESS across the several waves, a complete overview is available from the authors on request. The release of a cumulative dataset of the German ESS data containing all additional country-specific items of waves 1 – 6 is currently being planned.

in tracking changes over time for particular items which have been deleted or not incorporated into the official questionnaire of the ESS. When it comes to the contextual-level data, there are no country-specific additions or omissions as described for the individual-level data before. The ESS multilevel data for Germany, as for all other countries, stems from official statistics and information from different organisations (e.g., Eurostat, WHO, World Bank, Transparency International). The German media claims data is based on two national daily newspapers, namely the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) as well as the Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ).

Turning to the methodological aspects associated with the implementation of the ESS in Germany, questionnaire design and development follow the official ESS rules and specifications in order to assure cross-cultural comparability of the instruments. As there is no other language spoken by more than 5% of the population, the questionnaire is translated into German only. Following the release of the source questionnaire in English, the NCT prepares two translations, one by the survey manager and one by the members of the NCT. In a first review meeting, in which representatives of the selected survey organisation are also present, the two versions are compared and integrated into one. In a second step, the resulting version is reviewed and adjudicated with the teams from Austria and Switzerland, as these countries field the questionnaire in German as well. In wave seven, this resulted in a number of changes to accommodate different usages of certain words in the three countries. For almost all questions a common version could be agreed upon; only for a small number of items no translation could be found that fits the national context of all three countries. Subjecting the agreed version to SQP coding did not indicate any translation problems in rounds six or seven. After further verification by an external translator, the questionnaire is programmed as a CAPI instrument by the fieldwork agency[12] and pretested in the field using a quota sample of about 50 respondents. Given the extensive translation and review process, problems arising from question wording or topic choice are usually minor. As the questionnaire tends to take slightly longer in German than in British English, the average duration of an interview is 75 instead of 60 minutes. To reduce the interview burden for respondents, the questionnaire has been shortened and country-specific questions have been limited to a minimum in recent waves.

Overall, the sampling design followed the same strategy in all rounds so far and can be described as a stratified two-stage probability design.[13] In contrast to other countries, there are two independent target populations for West Ger-

12 With the exception of round five, all rounds have been conducted by the same fieldwork agency.

13 According to the census 2011, the overall size of the German population aged 15 years or older on September 1st of the year of the survey who are resident within private households was 69 406 343.

many (incl. West Berlin) and East Germany (incl. East Berlin). The East German population is oversampled by design in order to achieve a sample size large enough for separate analyses; the minimum sample size aimed for is 2000 in West and 1000 in East Germany. In wave seven, the number of PSUs has increased slightly from 168 (ESS 6) to 197 (131 in West Germany and 66 in East Germany), following suggestions from the SEP. The sample frame at the first stage is the official list of municipalities ("Gemeindeverzeichnis") from which individual municipalities are drawn. The list is stratified according to region and size of the municipalities. At the second sampling stage, sample points of a pre-specified number of persons are selected randomly from the person register held by the municipalities. The resulting list of addresses is the source for the field sample. By and large, the registers from local residents' registration offices are highly suitable for drawing probability samples because, at least in principle, the whole population is covered by the sample frame. Sampling from official address registers offers important information on non-response cases (such as age, sex and nationality). Also, the name of the target person is known and personalised advance letters can be sent. However, the sampling procedure has to start very early, as some municipalities require more than six months to select and send requested records from their registers.

The target response rate of 70%, as stated in the ESS specifications, is unrealistic in the German case. While the response rate was still above 50% in the first three rounds, it has dropped since to just above 30% in round five and has remained at this level in rounds six and seven. This is in line with other national studies in Germany: achieving interviews with about one third of the sample is now a realistic but ambitious goal for national surveys like the ESS. For example, the methodologically similar ALLBUS had a response rate of 47.3% in 2002 which dropped to 37.6% in 2012 (Wasmer et al., 2014, 73). Similarly, response rates for refreshment samples of the Socio-economic Panel (SOEP) dropped from above 50% in 2000 to just 34.7% in 2012 (Rahmann / Schupp, 2013). While the PIAAC study was able to achieve a response rate of 55% in 2011 / 12 (Zabal et al., 2014), the financial resources available to this study were much larger than what is common for social surveys in Germany. As one consequence of the comparatively low response rates in Germany, it proves difficult to achieve the targeted number of 3,000 interviews in the prescribed four months period. Due to the low response propensity in Germany, more people have to be contacted overall than in other countries and also more contacts have to be made in order to achieve an interview. This holds true despite the fact that, for the vast majority of cases, contact intensity is much higher than the requested four visits per household and additional contact attempts are made by a central telephone unit in cases where phone numbers for non-contacts are available. Thus, an extension of fieldwork into January and sometimes February has been necessary in all waves so far. Especially in the weeks before

and around Christmas, respondents are reluctant to being interviewed. To tackle the increasing problem of low response propensities, the incentives for respondents have increased substantially since the first wave. While small giveaways and lottery tickets were used in the first four rounds, these have been replaced by conditional monetary incentives. In round seven, fieldwork started with an incentive of 20 Euros (sent per mail after the completion of an interview), but had to be increased to 30 Euros in the middle of fieldwork and even to 40 Euros towards the very end. As can be seen, some of the challenges are likely to be similar for all countries in the ESS, while some of the challenges are unique to the German case, thereby highlighting the difficulty of obtaining cross-national equivalence in a study of 30 and more countries.

5. Additional Resources

This section briefly introduces additional resources provided by the ESS project team which may be of particular interest to those who want to get more familiar with the specifics, contents, and research potential of the ESS data.

The *ESS EduNet* contains online courses and tutorials on a broad variety of topics that are directly concerned with the ESS data itself or specificities associated with the analysis of ESS data. Currently, the ESS EduNet online tutorials cover topics such as immigration, well-being, social and political trust, as well as measurement error, multilevel analysis and weighting. As such, these online tutorials provide a lot of helpful hands-on information and guidance for new and advanced users of the ESS data. For those interested in the substantive findings and results based on ESS data, a summary of key findings stemming from analyses of the existing waves of the ESS is provided by a booklet series (*ESS Key Findings/ESS Topline Series*). So far, these booklets and summaries outline the key findings and results of previous ESS waves and cover topics such as Europeans' understandings of democracy, trust in justice, welfare attitudes, as well as the economic crisis. A comparable resource with a rather scientific background can be found in form of the *ESS bibliography* which includes all research articles and other publications analysing and dealing with ESS data. The ESS bibliography is integrated into the official ESS homepage and includes a search function which allows interested users to search for any ESS related publications on a certain topic, within a certain period of time, or for a selected sample of countries. It thus not only provides additional information on the contents of the ESS data but is also a helpful resource for researchers who are interested in the state of the art and the existing research on their topic of interest. Last but not least, the most informative (meta-)resource for any topic related to the ESS project is its *official website*. All the general information on which also this article is based is either directly available on the website or the linked documents provided there. Over 70,000 people across the

world have registered to use the website in order to download some of the material stored there or access its data.

6. Conclusion

This article has sought to provide a systematic overview and assessment of the design, contents and research potential of the ESS. Following the discussion of the methodological underpinnings of the ESS with a particular focus on questionnaire design and development, sampling procedures, and data collection, it is evident that the ESS is based on both tried and tested as well as innovative standards and measures that aim to guarantee the quality, cross-national comparability, and representativeness of the data collected across a broad variety of more than thirty European countries. With its broad coverage of socially, economically, and politically relevant attitudes and behaviours of European populations, the ESS provides a valuable resource to keep track of and analyse social change (and stability) in Europe at the outset of the 21st century.

The strength of the ESS project can clearly be found in the combination of the cross-national and the time-series data it provides. In particular, the stable design and contents of the core modules included in the ESS allow for the possibility to compare and analyse important attitudes and behaviours of European citizens (1) within one single country, (2) within one single country over time, (3) across countries, and (4) across countries over time. In combination with the contextual data the ESS project provides, the overall research potential of the ESS is even greater, allowing researchers to also take into consideration the (changing) contexts European citizens live in. These characteristics make the ESS a superior source compared to single-country data sets (which may offer a longer time-series, though) or cross-national data sets which are fielded only once or change the contents of their questions across different waves. In light of the long-term design and conception of the ESS, each additional wave of the ESS will further increase its existing research potential and, in particular, increasingly allow for meaningful time-series cross-section (TSCS) analyses. A central precondition in this context is that the ESS ERIC members remain committed to the current design and contents of the ESS and aim to further increase the number of participating countries (or, at least, to hold it constant). Looking at the design and contents of the currently fielded and scheduled ESS waves seven and eight (2014 and 2016), the future prospects for the ESS project appear promising.

References

Dorer, B. (2012a): ESS Round 6 Translation Guidelines. Mannheim: European Social Survey, GESIS.

Dorer, B. (2012b): ESS Round 6 Translation Quality Checklist. Mannheim: European Social Survey, GESIS.

Dorer, B. / *Widdop*, S. / *Gatrell*, L. / *Wäyrynen*, L. (2012): ESS 6 – Verification Instructions for National Coordinators. Mannheim: European Social Survey, GESIS.

European Social Survey (2013): Round 7 Specification for Participating Countries. London: Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, City University London.

European Social Survey (2012a): ESS Round 6 SQP Guidelines. Barcelona: European Social Survey, Research and Expertise Centre for Survey Methodology, University of Pompeu Fabra.

European Social Survey (2012b): Sampling for the European Social Survey Round VI: Principles and Requirements. Mannheim: European Social Survey, GESIS.

European Social Survey (2001): European Social Survey Core Questionnaire Development – overview. London: Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, City University London.

Harkness, J. A. (2007): Improving the Comparability of Translation, in: Jowell, R. / C. Roberts / R. Fitzgerald / G. Eva (eds.), Measuring Attitudes Cross-Nationally: Lessons from the European Social Survey. London, 79 – 94.

Harkness, J. A. (2003): Questionnaire Translation, in: J. A. Harkness / F. van de Vijver / P. Ph. Mohler (eds.), Cross-Cultural Survey Methods. Hoboken, NJ, 35 – 56.

Jowell, R. / *Roberts*, C. / *Fitzgerald*, R. / *Eva*, G. (eds.) (2007): Measuring Attitudes Cross-Nationally: Lessons from the European Social Survey. London.

Koch, A. / *Fitzgerald*, R. / *Stoop*, I. A. L. / *Widdop*, S. / *Halbherr*, V. (2012): Field Procedures in the European Social Survey Round 6: Enhancing Response Rates. Mannheim: European Social Survey, GESIS.

Koch, A. / *Halbherr*, V. / *Stoop*, I. A. L. / *Kappelhof*, J. W. S. (2014): Assessing ESS Sample Quality by Using External and Internal Criteria. Mannheim: European Social Survey, GESIS.

Kohler, U. (2008): Assessing the Quality of European Surveys. Towards an Open Method of Coordination for Survey Data, in: Alber, J. / T. Fahey / C. Saraceno (eds.), Handbook of Quality of Life in the Enlarged European Union. London, 405 – 24.

Kohler, U. (2007): Surveys from Inside. An Assessment of Unit Non-Response Bias Using Internal Criteria, Survey Reseach Methods 1 (2), 55 – 67.

Matsuo, H. / *Billiet*, J. / *Loosveldt*, G. / *Fitzgerald*, R. / *Widdop*, S. (2012b): ESS Round 6: Update on Explanations and Instructions for Completing ESS Contact Forms & Guidelines for Collecting Observable Data. Leuven: European Social Survey, University of Leuven.

Matsuo, H. / *Billiet*, J. / *Loosveldt*, G. / *Malnar*, B. (2010): Response-based Quality Assessment of ESS Round 4: Results for 30 Countries Based on Contact Files. Leuven: European Social Survey, University of Leuven.

Matsuo, H. / *Gatrell*, L. / *Halbherr*, V. / *Villar*, A. (2012a): ESS Interviewer Briefing: Best Practice Guidelines and 'ESS Scenarios'. Leuven: European Social Survey, University of Leuven.

Matsuo, H. / *Loosveldt*, G. (2013): Report on Quality Assessment of Contact Data Files in Round 5: Final Report 27 Countries. Leuven: European Social Survey, University of Leuven.

Rahmann, U. / *Schupp*, J. (2013): SOEP Wave Report 2012. Berlin: German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), DIW Berlin.

Stoop, I. A. L. / *Fernee*, H. / *Harrison*, E. (2012): Coding Media Claims in the European Social Survey, Round 6: Background, Guidelines, Coding Scheme and Codebook. The Hague: European Social Survey, SCP.

Wasmer, M. / *Blohm*, M. / *Walter*, J. / *Scholz*, E. / *Jutz*, R. (2014): Konzeption und Durchführung der 'Allgemeinen Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften' (ALLBUS) 2012, GESIS-Technical Reports 2014 (22).

Zabal, A. / *Martin*, S. / *Massing*, N. / *Ackermann*, D. / *Helmschrott*, S. / *Barkow*, I. / *Rammstedt*, B. (2014): PIAAC Germany 2012: Techncal Report. Münster / New York.