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22 Identifying reticent respondents in Romanian corruption surveys

Omar Azfar and Peter Murrell[1]

The accurate measurement of corruption has become an issue of critical importance to both researchers and policy makers. One increasingly prevalent method of collecting data on corruption is surveys. But corruption is a highly sensitive topic; many survey respondents are 'reticent' and may prefer to give incomplete or non-truthful responses. The following summarises how reticent respondents can be identified and removed from the data, thus increasing the accuracy of survey-based estimates of corruption.[2] The IRIS Center of the University of Maryland conducted a survey of 514 private sector firms in Romania. The survey design included innovative modules that could be used to identify respondents who were not giving candid answers to sensitive questions.

The general purpose of the survey was to understand the degree and nature of corruption in registering, licensing and inspecting businesses in Romania. The questionnaire therefore focused on business interactions with two government entities: the One-Stop Shops, charged with administering the registration (and frequent re-registration) of businesses; and the inspections and authorisations departments of the local branches of the health ministry. The former was chosen because all firms have to deal with the One-Stop Shops and the latter because health licensing is one of the most intrusive and administratively burdensome requirements that Romanian businesses face.

The randomised response method used to identify reticent respondents is as follows. Each respondent was asked to read a sensitive question and to toss a coin. An example of the question asked might be: 'Have you ever paid less in personal taxes than you should have under the law?' The respondent was then asked to say yes if *either* the coin came up heads *or* if he or she had indeed committed the act (which in this case would mean that he or she had paid less in personal taxes than was legally required). The procedure was repeated another six times with a different coin toss and a different sensitive question. None of these seven sensitive questions were about corruption.

If the respondent said no seven times in a row, he or she is classified as reticent, because it is very unlikely that the respondent would have tossed seven tails in a row. All other combinations are classified as 'possibly candid' as this group contains both candid respondents as well as some reticent respondents.

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2 The full paper is available at papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id = 870887

The respondents identified as reticent by the randomised response method admit to corruption interactions significantly less often than others do. The admission rate, among reticent respondents, for corrupt interactions with the One-Stop Shop and health inspectorate is around ¼ of the admission rate for the rest of the sample (3.7 per cent versus 15.3 per cent). Reticent respondents are also much more likely to state that there is no corruption in their *judets* (counties), even if the question is not about their own behaviour. They are also more likely to state that it is impermissible to break socially beneficial rules, ironically including the rule on not telling lies.

The findings show that older respondents are likely to be reticent, possibly because they have spent more time under communist rule, which probably has led to ingrained suspicion of strangers asking sensitive questions (every decade of life makes a respondent 2 per cent more likely to be identifiably reticent, which is a large effect in view of the average identifiable reticence of 10 per cent for the population). This implies that corruption reports in Romania may rise simply because of increased candour, as new cohorts of managers with no experience of communist rule enter the market.

Alternative theories were considered, but in order to explain the results observed, any alternative theory would necessarily imply that respondents who give a series of implausible answers on the randomised response questions are also less corrupt. Implausible answers would be given, presumably, for reasons such as fear of over-zealous prosecutors (in league with the surveyors) or averting moral opprobrium (of the Bayesian interviewers). This is possible, but inconsistent with several features of the study. The list of randomised response questions includes several such as 'promoting someone for an inappropriate personal reason' that are not illegal, and others such as that stated above, 'Have you ever paid less in personal taxes than you should have under the law?', which in Romania at least does not bear strongly on moral issues.

Finally it is worth noting that the technique developed to isolate unreliable respondents can be used to improve estimates in other surveys of the prevalence of many sensitive behaviours, like drug addiction, crime and health status, where surveys are used to estimate the extent of a particular behaviour.