

The Political Science Voluntary Subject Pool

A Handbook for Experimenters and Instructors

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Introduction

The voluntary subject pool is a research resource for faculty and graduate students within the Department of Political Science. It consists of undergraduate students who volunteer to participate in research studies, usually in exchange for a small amount of extra credit in a political science course.

The subject pool is a cooperative enterprise that depends for its success on the good will and sincere effort of instructors, undergraduate students, and above all researchers. Because instructors and their students are both, in a sense, "volunteers" in this enterprise, it is imperative that researchers exercise the highest level of respect and consideration while conducting their studies. To minimize the chances for mistakes and misunderstandings, this handbook outlines procedures for the operation of the subject pool and rules that researchers must abide by. It also contains suggestions for running efficient, relatively hassle-free studies.

The Subject Pool Coordinator

The subject pool is maintained by the subject pool coordinator, a graduate student research assistant within the Political Research Laboratory (PRL). The coordinator is responsible for collecting the names of student volunteers, distributing those names to researchers, and informing instructors of those students who are entitled to receive extra credit. The coordinator works with the director of the experimental laboratory (currently Tom Nelson) to ensure the smooth functioning of the pool.

Research Participants

Research participants are undergraduate students enrolled in political science courses – usually, but not always, lower-level courses (e.g., 100, 101, 145). They are recruited early in the quarter, either by the class instructor, or by the coordinator. The recruitment begins with a brief in-class presentation about the subject pool. During this presentation, students are informed of the voluntary nature of the pool and given a brief description of its procedures. Students are informed that all studies are approved by the human subjects review board, and the possibility of "deception" is clearly explained (see below). Lastly, students are invited to fill out a form indicating their willingness to participate. The amount of extra credit granted for participation is left to the discretion of the instructor;

usually it is in the neighborhood of 1-2 percentage points added to the final score per experiment, after letter grade cut-points are established. We suggest that the amount of extra credit be sufficient to add a half letter grade to students "at the borderline" (e.g., to move a student from B to B+).

When filling out the form, a student enters his or her name, telephone number, and email address. He or she also indicates his or her willingness to participate in deception studies, and whether or not he or she is graduating during the present term. Students are told that they need do nothing further; that it is the responsibility of the experimenter to contact them later in the quarter. Instructors collect the sign-up forms and deliver them to the subject pool coordinator.

Requesting Subjects

Requests for subjects are made directly to the coordinator during the final week of classes in the quarter previous to that for which they are needed. Researchers must submit a request in writing or by email stating the number of subjects needed and including a brief description of the study. Researchers must clearly indicate whether or not theirs is a deception study (see below). If demand is high relative to supply, researchers may be asked to submit a more extensive description of their study, including a research design and description of the manipulations, measures, and proposed analyses. The coordinator, in consultation with the experimental laboratory director, will determine if the request is excessive and make recommendations for modifications.

Human Subjects Approval

All studies must be approved as ethical by the Behavioral and Social Sciences Human Subjects Review Committee at the Ohio State Research Foundation (OSURF). Studies need not be approved when subjects are requested, but must be approved before subjects are allocated. Researchers are advised to submit their proposals to OSURF well in advance of the time they expect to collect data, because the Committee frequently requires revisions, especially for deception studies. For further information, and to request a form, contact the committee secretary at 2-6950. For advice on negotiating the approval process, contact the experimental laboratory director.

Consent Form

Every study, deception or otherwise, must begin by asking the subjects to give their written consent that they are undertaking the study voluntarily, and without duress. There are various forms for this purpose, including a standard form provided by the Human Subjects Review Committee. You can create your own form, provided it includes some essential language; see the coordinator or the experimental lab director for help. Aside from ethical considerations, the form is essential for keeping track of who participates and therefore deserves extra credit. Please turn completed forms in to the subject pool coordinator in a timely manner; don't hold them until the end of the quarter. At the end of the quarter, the coordinator will provide each instructor with a list of his or her students who participated, so that they may assign the appropriate credit.

Deception Studies

A special class of studies, called deception studies, can be especially problematic from an ethical standpoint. In a deception study, research participants are not fully informed of either the research hypotheses or the meaning and intent of certain manipulations and measures to which they are exposed. Deception can be fairly mild, such as not fully informing the research participants of the theoretical significance of the study; or it can be quite extreme, such as deliberately lying to participants. Deception is often desirable from a scientific standpoint. If participants are made fully aware of the intent and meaning of every aspect of a study, they might closely monitor or actually change their behavior, either deliberately or accidentally, thereby threatening the internal validity of the study. On the other hand, deception obviously compromises the principle of informed consent; furthermore, some kinds of deceptive manipulations, such as providing false feedback, can pose real threats to a participant's well-being. For these reasons, the Human Subjects Review Committee will scrutinize any proposal for a deception study extremely carefully and skeptically. The procedure for approval of deception studies is much more involved than for non-deception studies, so researchers are advised to begin the process far in advance of the time they will actually need the participants. Researchers will be required to provide a compelling scientific justification for the proposed deception. In order to preserve at least a modicum of informed consent, researchers employing deception must clearly point out the possibility of deception on their consent form, and assure participants both that they may quit the study at any time without penalty, and that they will receive a full debriefing after the study. Obviously, such researchers will only be assigned participants who have previously indicated their willingness to participate in deception studies.

Having pointed out all the drawbacks, it is worth noting that deception studies, once approved, usually run just as smoothly as non-deception studies. Very few participants are unwilling to be assigned to deception studies, and it is very rare that any problems arise because of the deception. Indeed, the vast majority of participants fully expect to be deceived, and enjoy hearing about what was "really going on" in an experiment. Good feedback is obviously crucial in such studies, especially when they involve potential threat to the participants' well-being.

Contacting Subjects

By far, the greatest number of complaints, frustrations, and bad feelings revolving around the subject pool arise from breakdowns or difficulties in making contact with student participants. Attempting to schedule sessions with students can be an extremely time-consuming and aggravating ordeal for experimenters. Some students seem never to be home; others can only be contacted by leaving messages with unreliable roommates. Above all is the problem of students who do not show up for their appointments. Some students will even miss re-scheduled appointments.

Despite all the headaches, the goodwill of the participants and the instructors demands that researchers adhere to a few sacred principles:

Attempt to Contact Every Subject

Every student who indicates a willingness to participate in the pool must have a legitimate opportunity to do so. It is patently unfair for some students to earn extra credit while others never get the chance, despite their willingness to do so. This means that the researcher must make a sincere effort to contact each and every person on their list. My personal rule of thumb is that every phone number should be dialed at least twice. Even in this day and age there are some students who do not have answering machines; their numbers should be dialed repeatedly at varying times in the day. Never assume that roommates will actually deliver messages, or even that messages left on answering machines will make it to their intended destinations. More and more subjects have email; this is obviously a good way to make at least an initial contact.

Some researchers have hit upon the innovation of asking instructors to pass around lists of sessions in class for which students sign themselves up. While this practice can be useful in some circumstances, it has some limitations. The most important problem is that students themselves do not know which study they have been assigned to. In classes where different students within the same class have been assigned to different studies, they may sign up and show up for the wrong experiment, which has the effect of short-changing other researchers. Furthermore, as instructors we all know that many students are not especially conscientious about attendance. Students who are not in class on a particular day may miss the opportunity to sign up for a study. As much as we may disapprove of skipping class, it is not a justification for excluding someone from extra credit consideration.

Offer Reasonably Convenient Appointments

Students who are not offered a reasonably convenient time for an appointment have, in effect, no opportunity for extra credit, which is unfair. What constitutes "reasonable" and "convenient" are undoubtedly matters for debate, but researchers should consider it their obligation and responsibility to attempt to accommodate a variety of schedules. Many OSU undergraduates work, and so have limited free time during normal business hours. Offering evening or weekend sessions will help accommodate these students. By no means should researchers schedule just a couple of large-group sessions and then make a "take it or leave it" offer to participants. I myself have run many sessions with just a single participant who simply could not make any of the pre-arranged sessions.

Scheduling becomes extremely tight at the end of the quarter. Students struggle to finish their final projects and to catch up on reading before exams, consequently they have much less free time. Of course, researchers themselves often put things off to the last minute, with the result that they desperately try to collect all their data at precisely the time when students are least available. Some students may simply forego the opportunity to earn extra credit when time is tight, which means less data for the researcher. Others will be angry, with some justification, at having been contacted at the last minute. **Please make every attempt to begin studies as early in the quarter as possible.** Graduating seniors, without exception, must be scheduled no later than the ninth week of class. A few

sessions during the tenth week of class are permissible, provided that the majority of subjects have been run prior to the tenth week, and that the coordinator is made aware in advance that some late sessions will be held. **Running subjects after the tenth week of class is absolutely forbidden.**

Give Respect and Courtesy Until It Hurts

To reiterate: participation in the subject pool, for both students and instructors, is not compulsory. Instructors will look distrustfully at the subject pool if they believe it to be intrusive or inconvenient, or if they feel their students are being abused in some way. Treating all participants, even difficult ones, with respect and courtesy, will go a long way toward preserving the good will upon which this process depends. This means not only following all the rules, but also observing these common courtesies:

- Don't call before 9 a.m. or after 11 p.m.
- Thank subjects profusely, both for offering to participate and for actually showing up and completing the study.
- Give feedback in everyday (i.e., non-technical) language.
- Apologize for any deception and make sure they understand why it was necessary.
- Allow no-shows a reasonable opportunity to "make up" a missed session.
- Return phone messages promptly.
- Be on time for scheduled sessions.

Running Sessions

You have every right to expect participants to show up on time, and to begin your studies at the appointed hour. You may or may not be able to accommodate latecomers, depending on the study. It is entirely appropriate to tell people who are more than a few minutes late that they will have to re-schedule in order to receive credit for the study. If starting promptly is a major concern for you, you would do well to remind students upon first contact that they will receive credit only if they show up on time.

There is no doubt that no-shows are the experimenter's biggest headache. Some students have the courtesy to phone ahead if they can't make a session, but most don't. It is very tempting to take a hard line with no-shows and simply "cross them off your list," but for several reasons, experimenters should be more lenient. First, according to the "courtesy principle" (see above), accommodating no-shows promotes smooth relations with students and instructors, especially if your no-show has a legitimate reason for missing his or her appointment. Second, few researchers have enough statistical power to afford throwing away potential data points. Third, there is a small but realistic prospect of selection bias. Samples of undergraduate student populations are unrepresentative enough to start with; limiting your sample to only conscientious undergraduates will make it even more peculiar.

If a session must be canceled for any reason that is not the fault of the subject (e.g., mechanical failure), experimenters are obligated to give credit to subjects who showed up. There are a few exceptionally generous subjects who will actually offer to come back for another session, but most will expect credit for showing up in good faith. Furthermore, on those rare occasions when a subject withdraws him- or her-self from the study because they object to some aspect of the procedure, you must give them full credit.

Advice On Running (Relatively) Trouble-Free Studies

In this section I pass along some additional tips and suggestions acquired from years of experience with experimental research. I would be very happy to receive feedback on the success or failure of these recommendations, or some of your own ideas for minimizing the hassle and maximizing the success of experiments. This information should be viewed as mere advice only; it is not intended as a substitute for formal training in experimental design.

Scheduling Subjects

There are a number of steps that can be taken at the scheduling stage to reduce the no-show rate and generally improve the operation of your study. First, the timing of your initial contact is important. Calling too far in advance of, or too close to, the actual date of the session can be damaging. My own rule of thumb is to attempt to make an initial contact 3-7 days in advance of the target session, although I must confess that calls the night before are frequently successful (don't count on it, though). Too much lead time means subjects forget; too little means subjects are not available. If the initial contact is more than two days in advance of the session, a reminder call the night before can be extremely helpful. You will have to decide for yourself if you can invest the time in reminder calls, but believe me, they work.

It is absolutely imperative to ensure that subjects write down their appointments. You would be amazed at the number of students who think they'll remember their appointment without writing it down. I find it very useful to drop a casual line like, "Do you have a pen or pencil handy?" to reinforce the importance of putting the information on paper. This goes for leaving messages as well; roommates often don't write down your name and number unless you specifically ask them to. Make sure subjects write down the date, time, and location of their session; make sure they also write down your name and phone number. Frequently, more than one experiment is going on at the same time. The number of students who simply show up at Derby Hall asking "Where is the experiment?" is truly alarming. Lastly, make sure they have directions. Ask them point-blank, "Do you know how to get to 2049 Derby Hall (or whatever your location may be)?" Prepare a set of directions from a couple of different campus landmarks.

And speaking of rehearsal, you will occasionally be asked, "What's the study about?" A short prepared answer here will be quite useful. You needn't be very specific; you can simply say "It's a questionnaire study concerning your political attitudes," or some similarly vague description. What the student is often really asking when they pose that question is, "Am I going to get an electric shock? Am I going to have to sing, or take off

my clothes?" Essentially, they want reassurance that nothing strange or painful is going to happen.

Running Subjects

It is wise to let people in the main office know once your experiment is underway. A quick memo to them indicating the location and dates of your sessions will help them direct lost subjects to the right place.

As indicated above, it is perfectly appropriate to tell subjects who are especially late that they will need to re-schedule. This doesn't mean they're going to cheerfully accept that they've dragged themselves over to Derby Hall for nothing. If starting on time is especially critical for your study, make sure to say so at scheduling time. It can be very useful to drop a line like "We need to make sure everybody in this session begins at the same time, so please try to get to the session on time. We may have to reschedule you if you're late." This will help prevent misunderstandings among those subjects who believe that 10 minutes late still qualifies as "on time."

Feedback

OSURF, as far as I know, does not require feedback, except for deception studies. I consider oral and/or written feedback compulsory for all my studies, if only for good public relations.

If you are new to writing experiment feedback, ask an experienced researcher for some examples from their own work. Here are a few tips:

- Keep it short – a page or less is plenty.
- Use everyday, nontechnical language. Avoid social science jargon.
- Explaining the overall goals or purpose of the study is more important than justifying every little manipulation or measure.
- Put your phone number at the bottom.
- Include at least one source for further information, preferably an accessible, nonspecialist's treatment of your subject matter.
- Be sure to explain fully any deception. Apologize for any possible hurt feelings, and offer to stay after a session for further explanation and discussion.

If you are running a deception study and are concerned about subjects learning about the deception from subjects in prior sessions, you may wish to add a line to your feedback requesting subjects to keep quiet about the experiment until the end of the quarter.

Reference

For a much more extensive discussion of both formal experimental design and informal tips for good experimentation, consult the following:

Aronson, Elliot, Phoebe C. Ellsworth, J. Merrill Carlsmith, and Marti Hope Gonzales.
1990. *Methods of Research in Social Psychology* (Second Edition). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Christensen, Larry B. 1997. *Experimental Methodology* (7th Edition). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.