

TIPSHEET – INTERVIEWING ELITES

Interviews of elite actors, such as Members of Congress, can be a rich source of information. However, securing and conducting effective interviews of elites poses a unique set of challenges. This tipsheet covers techniques for acquiring an elite interview and getting the most out of it.

Getting in the Door

- Send an advance letter or email
 - Make it official
 - Give the respondent plenty of time to respond
 - Spell out basics of the research and the amount of time it will demand, but avoid giving too much detail about the nature of the research project.
 - Cover the ground rules (how the information will be recorded, used, etc.).
 - Keep it short and clear
- Follow up with a phone call repeating this information
 - A study of Russian political elites reportedly took 15 to 20 calls to arrange a single interview
 - Depending on cultural norms, initial letters and phone calls may not succeed at gaining an interview. As a result, it may be necessary to simply show up.
 - Be prepared for respondents to avoid selecting a fixed time and instead preferring you to simply drop by
- Don't be afraid to use respondents to gain access to other respondents
- Respondents should be made to feel that their contribution is important and their insight valuable. Elites tend to be hostile to standard survey formats, particularly those consisting of closed-ended questions.
- Elites should be approached by interviewers that have some status of their own (i.e., academics).
- Ask for an intermediate length of time for interview (e.g., 20-45 minutes). Asking for too much time may place too great of a burden and decrease response rate. However, asking for too little will not only hurt your data, but also may cause respondents to not take you seriously (presumably serious consideration of a topic cannot be given in 10 minutes).

Interview Format

The format of interviews can vary considerably, from a casual conversation to a standard survey approach utilizing closed questions. A few types of interviews are detailed below. However, a common approach is to borrow strength from each approach. This mixed approach begins with open-ended questions, allowing more latitude for the interviewee, but follows up with closed questions. This design allows elites to express their opinions in all their complexity, creating greater comfort with the subsequent “straightjacket” of closed questions.

- Structured interview – carefully designed interview, specific questions asked in a set order, many questions with fixed or closed response
 - Provides greatest control over data and greatest comparability of responses
 - Greatest ease of analysis
 - Elites tend to be most averse to this format. It is perceived as constraining expert opinion and signals an approach not tailored to the individual being interviewed.
- Semi-structured – similar to the structured interview, but allows for follow-up questions to get greater detail. May include time-specific or contextual questions that are not relevant to all respondents.
- Unstructured interview – consists of prompts designed to give respondents wide leeway in interpretation and direction of the conversation.
 - This approach is most useful for exploratory work. If the research does not have specific hypotheses or particular variables of interest, this approach can be useful for developing theories and hypotheses.
 - Demands the most skill from interviewers
 - Greater possibility of missing data due to questions not asked

Mode of interview

- Trust in the research and assurances of confidentiality are harder to establish in a telephone survey
- Studies typically have higher response rates and more detailed responses with face-to-face interviews than with phone interviews or mail surveys

Designing the interview

- Prepare an outline of the coding procedure ahead of time and
 - Design questions to fill in the coding procedure
 - Prepare probes, or common follow-up questions to get greater detail
- Begin with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, just as with any survey. If interview is not anonymous, make clear that the interviewee can also speak “off the record”. Remind them of who you are and why you are there.

- Start in with an easy, broad question. This serves to get respondents comfortable talking. However, it is also desirable to establish early on that you are knowledgeable about the topic, perhaps by asking more specific questions to demonstrate your knowledge.
 - Discussion about personal background can be a way of establishing comfort and rapport. However, this depends on cultural context. In some studies, personal questions may arouse suspicion and undermine the promise of anonymity.
- Never ask for objective information that is available elsewhere. This signals that you haven't done your homework and are wasting their time.
- Use multiple questions to tap into the same concept in order to establish convergent validity. For example, if the concept of interest is free market ideology, ask about two separate, specific issues that raise the questions related to the free market.
- Save sensitive questions for the middle of the interview, when the respondent has become comfortable talking. It may be helpful to admit that the question may be uncomfortable.
- Find a way to mix harder and easier questions. Respondents often get tired after a long string of detailed questions, which can diminish the quality of subsequent responses.
- Be sure to practice the interview with friends or colleagues.
 - Gives an idea of how long it will take
 - Gives insight into improving question order
- Prepare bridging questions that will bring you back on topic or onto a new topic. Bridging questions do not necessarily need to logically follow from conversation.

Carrying out the interview

- Use the language of the respondent. Do not use academic jargon.
- Fend off any questions about your hypotheses – these should be deflected until the end of the interview in order to avoid biasing your results and wasting your own interview time
- Avoid asking questions that might come across as critical
 - Be careful about asking “why?” as it can be perceived as critical. Instead, reframe questions in terms of what or how. For example, “why did you vote for that legislation” can be reframed as “what considerations did you have in mind when you voted for that legislation.”
 - Often the combination of silence and eye contact is effective at getting a respondent to elaborate
- Give the respondent room to wander in their discussion, but be ready to politely bring the respondent back on topic
- Focus on topics that you think will be productive. Respondents might be unwilling to discuss a particular topic, or might be perfectly willing to give you a very biased, misleading, or self-congratulatory account. This can be a waste of your interview time.
- Be prepared with extra questions if your respondent suddenly finds more time

Recording your interview

- Tape recorders
 - Minimize information loss
 - Facilitate conversational style
 - Some claim that taping makes respondents uncomfortable and even unwilling to talk, while others have noted that most respondents quickly forget it is being done. This will likely depend on the nature of the respondent and the topic.
- If foregoing a tape recorder, take notes in the form of key words. Immediately after completing the interview, fill out the notes with as much detail as possible.
- Regardless of recording method, it may be worthwhile to take notes on body language, expressions, etc. that provide insight to a respondent.

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