

Survey Uptake Decisions with a Transparent Default



Disclosing the purpose of a default selection increases the likelihood that survey respondents choose to receive future contacts.

Target a Priority Outcome

The Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) developed a survey experiment to estimate how responsive decision makers are to information about program impact and wanted to understand the effectiveness of a transparent default on enrollment for future surveys. Encouraging survey respondents to participate in subsequent surveys may help generate novel insights about how policymakers make decisions across a range of topics and contexts. The last question of the survey asked respondents whether they would like to be contacted for future surveys and pre-selected “Yes” (by default, with the ability to opt out) to encourage future participation.

Translate Behavioral Insights

Default selections tend to be effective at encouraging desired choices among respondents.¹ Disclosing the target behavior, purpose, or general effect of a default selection – a transparent default – may increase the effectiveness of default selections by increasing the perception that the endorser is fair and trustworthy² or providing justification for the preferred choice.³

The “Yes” option was pre-selected for all respondents who progressed to the final survey question. All respondents who progressed to the end of the survey experiment saw the following final question (standard default):

Thank you for completing this survey!

Can we contact you about similar future surveys? You'd never get more than one invitation a month - usually much less often. It would always be your choice whether or not to answer each survey.

These surveys are part of work the Office of Evaluation Sciences does to improve government services by using behavioral insights, and we'd be very grateful for your help.

OES also developed a transparent default selection for this question to indicate why OES had pre-selected the “Yes” response. The following text appeared after the “Yes” option for select participants (transparent default):

“NOTE: We have preselected this option because we want to have enough respondents for future surveys to help build evidence to improve government services.”

Embed Evaluation

OES administered the survey experiment among 192 federal employees recruited from across 22 U.S. government agencies from May to October, 2021.⁴ The “Yes” option was pre-selected for all respondents who progressed to the final survey question. Respondents were randomly assigned to see either the transparent default version with the additional explanatory note or a standard default version with no additional text after the preselected “Yes” option. A total of 182 respondents saw the final question, with 89 assigned to see the transparent default and 93 assigned to see the standard default.⁵

¹ Jachimowicz, Jon M., Shannon Duncan, Elke U. Weber, and Eric J. Johnson. “When and why defaults influence decisions: A meta-analysis of default effects.” *Behavioural Public Policy* 3, no. 2 (2019): 159-186.

² Paunov, Yavor, Michaela Wänke, and Tobias Vogel. “Transparency effects on policy compliance: disclosing how defaults work can enhance their effectiveness.” *Behavioural Public Policy* 3, no. 2 (2019): 187-208.

³ Paunov, Yavor, Michaela Wänke, and Tobias Vogel. “Ethical defaults: which transparency components can increase the effectiveness of default nudges?” *Social Influence* 14, no. 3-4 (2019): 104-116.

⁴ Details on the survey administration and results of the main survey experiment are reported in a separate project abstract: <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/policymakers-impact/>.

⁵ Ten respondents completed the main survey but exited out of the survey before seeing the final question.

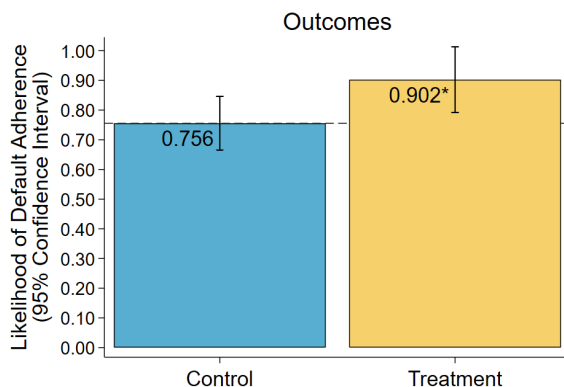
Analyze Using Existing Data

The evaluation was administered using an online survey platform. The primary outcome of interest is whether or not the respondent agreed to receive invitations to participate in future OES surveys.⁶ The proportion of “Yes” responses to the final survey questions among respondents who saw the transparent default was compared to the proportion among the group that saw the standard default.

Results

Including a transparency statement with a default selection increased the acceptance of the default (“Yes”) option by 14.7 percentage points ($p = .01$, 95% CI [3.7, 25.7]). This difference was statistically significant and resulted in an additional 13 respondents (of the 89 that saw the transparency statement) indicating that they are willing to receive survey invitations in the future.

Figure 1: A transparent default increased responses indicating willingness to receive future survey requests compared with a standard default.



Build Evidence

The results indicate that providing a transparent description of why a choice was preselected can increase acceptance of that choice. This default choice involved a relatively low-stakes decision — a “Yes” response only commits the respondent being kept on a mailing list for future optional surveys — with a clear and easy way to opt-out of the default.

⁶ Unless noted otherwise, all of the analysis reported in this abstract was prespecified in an analysis plan, which can be found at <https://oes.gsa.gov/projects/transparent-defaults/>.

Yet drawing a respondent’s attention to a transparency message reduced the likelihood that a respondent took action to avoid future survey invitations.

A limitation of the study is that it may be difficult to generalize the result to a broader population or other contexts. The survey was completed by a group of Federal government employees who had already volunteered to participate in a survey, and who may be more likely to respond positively to a transparency statement.