

Converting Mail Mode Panelists to Web and Measuring Their Early Internet Experiences

Why panelists participating by mail were converted to web

When it was first created in 2014, the American Trends Panel (ATP) interviewed adults without internet access via mailed paper questionnaires. The remainder of the panel was interviewed online. The first 20 surveys conducted on the panel featured this dual mode design. During the summer and fall of 2016, the mail panelists were provided with a tablet device, a data plan and training so that they could participate online. Wave 21, conducted Sept. 27-Oct. 10, 2016, was the first ATP survey administered entirely online. The mail-to-web conversion was done to overcome two major limitations of mail administration: It requires a long field period (which makes quick, timely polling impossible) and it severely restricts questionnaire design (extensive skips, fills and randomization are all impractical).

Conversion protocol

Panel members who had been participating via mail were sent a letter via USPS first class mail in advance of the conversion call to inform them of an upcoming change in the way they take their surveys. The panel vendor, Abt SRBI (now Abt Associates), placed a conversion call to each panelist approximately one week after the letter was mailed. The purpose of the conversion call was to inform the panel members of the switch to web-only mode and to determine if the panel member needed to be provided internet access and a device to take the surveys. A series of questions were asked to each panel member to determine if they had internet access, an email account and a device on which to take the surveys. Panel members reporting no internet access, email and device were offered an internet-enabled tablet computer. Panel members who reported having internet access, a device for taking web surveys and an email account were converted without being provided a tablet.

After the conversion call, converted panel members requiring internet access and a device were shipped a preconfigured cellular-enabled tablet. Detailed instructions were included with the tablet for how to charge the tablet, turn on and use the tablet and how to access the survey via the preinstalled app.

Converted panel members that were provided a tablet were given a follow up call after receiving it. The purpose of the follow up call was to confirm that they were able to charge and power up the tablet and to explain how to take a survey. After basic features were reviewed, the panel members were asked to open the Mobile Panel application on the home screen to access a practice survey. A

practice survey was set up to show panel members where to look for a survey link and how to access it. The practice survey let the panel members see different types of questions that are frequently asked, such as single-punch, multi-punch and open-ended. After completing the brief practice survey, panel members were asked to review and accept a user agreement for the tablet and internet access. Converted panel members who did not receive a tablet were not contacted for a follow up call. Instead, they were emailed a link to the same practice survey to confirm they are able to receive the email invitation and access a survey. The telephone interviewers conducting the follow up calls were trained on how to use the tablet and how to troubleshoot basic issues. Panel members who needed further technical assistance during the follow up call were transferred to a subcontractor to resolve the issue. There was also an icon on the home screen of the tablet next to the Mobile Panel app that panel members could use to allow remote access to the device for technical support. Technical support is provided to panel members free of charge.

Upon completing the follow up call, panel members were converted to web mode. Converted panel members receive a push notification on their tablet to notify them that their survey is available. They also receive a postcard in the mail. Converted panel members who did not yet complete their survey receive a reminder call in the last week of the field period. The reminder calls were used for the first three panel surveys following the conversion.

Results of the mail-to-web conversion

In total, 574 ATP panelists were eligible for the mail-to-web conversion. Most of them (n=434) did not have internet access or email prior to the conversion. A total of n=176 previously non-internet adults completed at least one survey on their ATP-provided tablet. Some n=166 tablet-enabled panelists completed the ATP survey conducted May 30-Oct. 23, 2017, which measured the internet experiences of these n=112 new users.

Mail-to-web conversion call

% of mail panelists that ...

	Percent
Successfully converted	41
Did not convert	59

Source: Mail-to-web conversion records. N=574.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The American Trends Panel Survey Methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by the Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults recruited from landline and cellphone random-digit-dial surveys. Panelists participate via monthly self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by Abt Associates.

Data in this report are drawn from the panel wave conducted May 30-Oct. 23, 2017, among 5,422 respondents. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 5,422 respondents is plus or minus 1.98 percentage points.

Members of the American Trends Panel were recruited from several large, national landline and cellphone random-digit-dial (RDD) surveys conducted in English and Spanish. At the end of each survey, respondents were invited to join the panel. The first group of panelists was recruited from the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, conducted Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014. Of the 10,013 adults interviewed, 9,809 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 5,338 agreed to participate.¹ The second group of panelists was recruited from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey on Government, conducted Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015. Of the 6,004 adults interviewed, all were invited to join the panel, and 2,976 agreed to participate.² The third group of panelists was recruited from a survey conducted April 25 to June 4, 2017. Of the 5,012 adults interviewed in the survey or pretest, 3,905 were invited to take part in the panel and a total of 1,628 agreed to participate³.

The ATP data were weighted in a multi-step process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that in 2014 some panelists were subsampled for invitation to the panel. Next, an adjustment was made for the fact that the propensity to join the panel and remain an active panelist varied across different groups in the sample. The final step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on a number of dimensions. Gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin and region parameters come from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015 American Community Survey. The county-level population density parameter (deciles) comes from the 2010 U.S. Decennial

¹ When data collection for the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey began, non-internet users were subsampled at a rate of 25%, but a decision was made shortly thereafter to invite all non-internet users to join. In total, 83% of non-internet users were invited to join the panel.

² Respondents to the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey who indicated that they are internet users but refused to provide an email address were initially permitted to participate in the American Trends Panel by mail, but were no longer permitted to join the panel after Feb. 6, 2014. Internet users from the 2015 Pew Research Center Survey on Government who refused to provide an email address were not permitted to join the panel.

³ White, non-Hispanic college graduates were subsampled at a rate of 50%.

Census. The telephone service benchmark comes from the January-June 2016 National Health Interview Survey and is projected to 2017. The volunteerism benchmark comes from the 2015 Current Population Survey Volunteer Supplement. The party affiliation benchmark is the average of the three most recent Pew Research Center general public telephone surveys. The internet access benchmark comes from the 2017 ATP Panel Refresh Survey. Respondents who did not previously have internet access are treated as not having internet access for weighting purposes. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the Hispanic sample in the American Trends Panel is predominantly native born and English speaking.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	5,422	2.0 percentage points
First-time internet users	112	9.3 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The NM/ME RF2 wave had a response rate of 80.1% (5,422 responses among 6,766 individuals in the panel). Taking account of the combined, weighted response rate for the recruitment surveys (10.0%) and attrition from panel members who were removed at their request or for inactivity, the cumulative response rate for the wave is 2.8 %⁴.

© Pew Research Center, 2017

⁴ Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves are removed from the panel. These cases are counted in the denominator of cumulative response rates.