Interview Methods in Political Science

by
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The following essays are based on presentations given by the authors during a short course on elite interviewing, held at the 2001 APSA meeting in San Francisco. The short course, sponsored by the Political Organizations and Parties organized section of the APSA, drew nearly 100 participants.

The term elite interviewing generates some confusion and disagreement, as some researchers use "elite" to refer to the socioeconomic position of the respondent, whereas for others it has more to do with how the respondent is treated by the interviewer. There is an interaction between these two situations, as political scientist Lewis Dexter pointed out in his book, *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*:

> "In standardized interviewing…the investigator defines the question and the problem; he is only looking for answers within the bounds set by his presuppositions. In elite interviewing, as here defined, however, the investigator is willing, and often eager to let the interviewee teach him what the problem, the question, the situation, is.…Partly out of necessity…this approach has been adopted much more often with the influential, the prominent and the well-informed than with the rank-and-file of a population. For one thing, a good many well-informed or influential people are unwilling to accept the assumptions with which the investigator starts; they insist on explaining to him how they see the situation, what the real problems are as they view the matter" (pp. 6–7).

The essays presented here for the most part focus on interviews of people in decision-making or leadership roles—members of Congress, members of parliaments, top-level bureaucrats, party leaders, and interest group leaders. More broadly speaking, however, elite interviewing can be used whenever it is appropriate to treat a respondent as an expert about the topic at hand. One of the essays on these pages, for example, involves interviews with activists, who while not "elites" in the socioeconomic sense of the word, are experts in their field and treated as such by the interviewer.

There have been relatively few resources in the discipline for training students and other researchers about the methodological challenges and informational benefits of conducting interviews with elite subjects. It is our hope that the short course and these essays help further discussion of these topics.

Contributors to this symposium

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