

Who Participates in Focus Groups?

Diagnosing Self-Selection*

Taylor C. Boas, Boston University

November 24, 2023

Forthcoming, *PS: Political Science & Politics*

Abstract

Focus groups have become increasingly popular in political science alongside the growth in field experimental and other causal inference-oriented work in comparative politics. Yet scholars rarely provide details about recruitment processes or offer descriptive statistics on focus group participants. This situation is problematic given the likelihood of self-selection and the fact that scholars often use focus groups to pretest or refine experimental treatments or survey questionnaires. Leveraging a series of focus groups that were recruited from a pool of large-N survey respondents, I demonstrate a method for assessing what variables drive the decision to participate. I recommend that scholars diagnose self-selection into focus groups whenever possible; that they compare participants to relevant baselines when working with samples of convenience; and that they always provide descriptive statistics and details on how focus group members were recruited.

*Thanks to Jennifer Cyr and two anonymous reviewers for comments on previous versions; to Marina Barros, Charlotte Greenhill, Andre Melhado Araujo Lima, Renata Nunes, and Lara Werneck for research assistance; to the Brazilian Women's Group for permission to conduct surveys at the 2022 Brazilian Independence Day Festival in Boston; to James McCann and Breno Hermann for general advice and support; and to the Center for Innovation in Social Science at Boston University for financial assistance. This research was declared exempt by the Institutional Review Board of Boston University (Protocol 6657X). Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study (Boas, 2023) are openly available at the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YXILZP>. The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

1 Introduction

Focus groups, once an uncommon method in political science research, have become increasingly popular alongside the growth of causal inference-oriented work in comparative politics. As summarized in Table 1, I identified 36 articles published in the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, and *Journal of Politics* from 2013–2022 that convey findings from original focus groups, versus only 4 articles that Cyr (2016) found in the first two journals during the prior decade. The Appendix lists these articles and describes the analysis in more detail. These articles used focus groups as part of a multi-method research design, typically involving field or survey experiments (22 out of 36 articles); none relied solely on focus groups or combined them primarily with other qualitative methods. They were conducted exclusively in countries of the Global South and in research falling into the subfield of comparative politics or its intersection with international relations. Focus groups were used most commonly to inform a study’s research design—for example, developing or pretesting experimental treatments or survey instruments—and for purposes of triangulation, offering qualitative evidence to bolster quantitative findings or provide insight into causal mechanisms.

Despite the growing popularity of focus groups in journals and broader research designs with rigorous methodological standards, scholars rarely say much about the methodology used to conduct them. Most articles convey focus group findings only briefly, often in merely a sentence or two. On average across these studies, the text that conveyed focus group findings and design details took up only 1.8 percent of the article’s overall word count.

In particular, scholars often say little or nothing about how focus group participants were recruited or the sample on which their findings are based. Only 8 out of 36 articles described the focus group recruitment process in either the main text or the online appendix. Only 3 provided descriptive statistics on focus group participants, and none compared them to a relevant baseline, such as the sampling frame from which they were drawn or the participants in large-N components of the study. This scant attention to focus group recruitment contrasts with the extensive detail

Table 1: Research Using Focus Groups, 2013–2022: Descriptive Statistics

Articles		Articles	
Journal		Reporting	
APSR	14	Recruitment details	8
AJPS	12	Descriptive statistics	3
JOP	10	Purpose	
Subfield		Design	18
CP	28	Triangulation	16
IR/CP	8	Outcome measure	2
Country		Treatment	1
Brazil	5	Combined With	
India	5	Observational	15
Afghanistan	4	Field experiment	14
Uganda	4	Survey experiment	8
Other SSA	8	Focus Group Share of Text	
Other LA	6	Less than 2%	30
Other S/SE Asia	2	2% to 10%	4
MENA	2	More than 10%	2

Note: Figures for Purpose double-count one article that used focus groups for both triangulation and as an outcome measure; those for Combined With double-count one article that used observational analysis plus a survey experiment. The field experiment category includes one lab-in-the-field experiment.

authors typically provide when describing how subjects were recruited for original surveys and field experiments.

Leaving focus group recruitment as a black box is problematic because of the potential for participant self-selection. In contrast to answering a survey, which might take 30 minutes and never require leaving one’s house, focus group participation involves traveling to and from a common gathering location and remaining there for approximately two hours, so logistical or time constraints may be a disincentive. Talking about politics with strangers is not everyone’s favorite activity, so people may also opt out due to shyness or a lack of interest in the subject matter.

Given how focus groups are used in political science research, selection bias is a potential concern regardless of whether one samples randomly or purposively. Simple random sampling from a general population is rarely used for focus groups, given the potential for sampling error with

a small N, the concern for group dynamics that often implies recruiting relatively homogeneous participants, and scholars' theoretical interest in respondents with particular characteristics (Cyr, 2019; Fern, 2001; Hennink, 2014; Krueger and Casey, 2014; Liamputtong, 2011; Morgan, 2019; Van Ingelgom, 2020). But unless one has a theoretical or methodological reason to recruit participants who are highly interested in the topic, outspoken or gregarious, and find it convenient to attend, these are not desirable characteristics to have crop up in a focus group sample.

As a small-N method with non-randomly selected participants, focus group findings are not typically generalized to a larger population (Cyr, 2019; Hennink, 2014; Krueger and Casey, 2014; Morgan and Scannell, 1998; Morgan, 2019; Van Ingelgom, 2020). Yet in political science, focus groups are typically used to inform research on a broader study population, and scholars may seek to generalize those findings beyond the study itself. For these reasons, undiagnosed self-selection can be particularly problematic. For example, focus groups are routinely used to pilot or refine experimental treatments or survey instruments to ensure that they are relevant and easily understood by study participants. If focus group members are disproportionately interested in and knowledgeable about politics, their feedback may offer misleading conclusions about how effective particular interventions or measures will be with a broader population.

Self-selection may not always introduce major biases into a focus group sample; in the example below, I argue that it does not. The problem may be more severe in fields other than political science, where it is more common to recruit vulnerable or hidden populations, such as intravenous drug users. But regardless of their theoretical expectations of self-selection, scholars using focus groups are flying blind to a potentially important source of bias if they fail to diagnose its severity and possible consequences.

Methodological research on focus groups has largely neglected this issue of selection bias. Work on this method routinely talks about the plusses and minuses of different recruitment strategies, but the major concerns are purely practical ones—ensuring that enough participants show up, and that they are willing to talk to one another, in order to hold a group discussion (Barbour, 2018; Cyr, 2019; Hennink, 2014; Krueger and Casey, 2014; Liamputtong, 2011; Morgan and Scannell, 1998;

Van Ingelgom, 2020; Wallace, Goodyear-Grant and Bittner, 2021). Some texts refer in passing to possible concerns about self-selection and its implications for sample composition. For example, Stewart and Shamdasani (2015, 66) note that “growing ‘time poverty’ raises some concerns about the lifestyle representativeness of individuals who do show up for focus groups.” Yet none of this methodological literature offers practical advice on diagnosing the severity and potential consequences of focus group self-selection.

The scant attention to sample selection processes in focus group research contrasts with the extensive focus on self-selection and nonresponse bias in the survey research methods literature (e.g., Berinsky, 2007; Groves, 2006; Malhotra and Krosnick, 2007; Wagner, 2012). General survey methods textbooks routinely devote a chapter or more to these topics (Fowler, 2013; Groves et al., 2009; Lohr, 2022), and specialized books focus on them exclusively (Caughey et al., 2020; Groves and Couper, 2012; Särndal and Lundström, 2005).

Selection processes might seem to be a more natural concern in large-N quantitative research, which typically aims to generalize to a broader population. Yet case selection strategies and the threat of selection bias are also central topics in the small-N, qualitative methods literature (Collier, Mahoney and Seawright, 2004; Geddes, 1990; Gerring and Cojocaru, 2016; King, Keohane and Verba, 1994; Seawright and Gerring, 2008). Focus group scholars should pay attention to selection processes as well.

2 Assessing the Focus Group Selection Process

In this section, I provide an example of how scholars might diagnose what drives the decision to participate in focus group research. I leverage a series of focus groups whose members were recruited from a pool of large-N survey respondents, allowing me to characterize both participants and non-participants.

In September–November 2022, I conducted three focus groups as part of a project examining the political attitudes of Brazilian immigrants to the Boston area. The research sought to understand

why Boston-area Brazilians were overwhelmingly supportive of right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro and what role conservative religion, particularly evangelicalism, played in their attitude formation. The centerpiece was an exit poll of Brazilians who voted in person in their country's 2022 presidential election at expatriate polling places set up by the Brazilian consulate. Our research team surveyed voters on election day for both the first round (October 2) and runoff (October 30). We also conducted a pre-test of the survey at the 2022 Brazilian Independence Day Festival in Boston in early September. The survey took the form of a self-administered Portuguese-language paper questionnaire that respondents filled out and returned to enumerators, with questions about their experiences as migrants and their attitudes about Brazilian and American politics.

At the bottom of the paper questionnaire, respondents were invited to leave their contact information (name, phone, and email) on a tear-off sheet to potentially receive an invitation to a focus group; 45 percent of respondents did so. Participants were offered \$50 gift cards as compensation for their time and travel expenses. I used the following recruitment text:

Many thanks! Would you like to participate in a discussion group in Portuguese to talk in greater depth about these issues? We are going to organize groups on the coming weekends. Your participation would last between 1.5 and 2 hours and you would receive a \$50 gift card.

If you want to receive an invitation to a discussion group, leave your information so we may contact you. This form will be separated from your answers above to maintain anonymity.

Based on prior research, I anticipated, and ultimately found, that being an evangelical Christian was a strong predictor of Brazilian migrants' support for Bolsonaro. The focus groups sought to understand why evangelicals were such strong Bolsonaro supporters and whether dynamics were any different for their Catholic counterparts. After each round of the survey, including the pre-test at the September festival, a Brazilian-American research assistant invited respondents who were 30–70 years old and were churchgoing, Bolsonaro-supporting Christians to participate in a focus

group. We invited 22 respondents to the first focus group on September 25, 48 to the second on October 15, and 77 to the third on November 19. Between 9 and 11 respondents RSVP'd and 6 actually showed up to each focus group. Groups were held in meeting rooms in local public libraries on a Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon and ran for 1.5–2.5 hours.

Given that focus group participants were recruited from among the survey respondents, I am able to compare them on observable characteristics to those who were invited but did not attend. I can also examine the characteristics of survey respondents who left their contact information to potentially receive a focus group invitation, versus those who did not. An Appendix table presents descriptive statistics for these four groups, along with p-values corresponding to difference in means tests. In addition to variables measured directly in the survey itself, I calculate the distance from the respondent's self-reported hometown to the relevant focus group location.

Descriptive statistics suggest that, in the present study, self-selecting into the focus group-eligible sample and attending after having been invited do not introduce major biases. For two of the three survey rounds, those who left their contact information have significantly higher levels of interest in Brazilian politics. However, the difference is substantively small, about a third of a standard deviation of the interest variable in each case. Moreover, survey respondents as a whole were already highly interested in Brazilian politics—an average of 3.5 on a 1–4 scale—which is unsurprising since most were interviewed after having voted in a home-country election from the United States. Other differences showed up only in one of the three groups.

Table 2 presents results from logistic regressions of the decision to leave contact information and to attend the focus group once invited, pooling data from all three rounds of the survey (with fixed effects for each round).¹ Non-Christians (with Catholics as the baseline category), men, and those with more interest in Brazilian politics were more likely to opt into the focus group-eligible sample by leaving their contact information. Among those invited to the focus group, the only significant predictor of showing up was church attendance. While I avoided Sunday mornings for the focus

¹As shown in the Appendix, linear probability models yield substantively identical results, as does the Firth (1993) method for bias reduction with rare events for the model of attending the focus group.

groups, some churches hold worship services at other times, and frequent churchgoers are also likely to have other church-related commitments on the weekends.² Unexpectedly, distance from the focus group location was not significant in either model. Income was also not a significant predictor, suggesting that compensation was neither coercive nor caused undue influence, per IRB guidelines.³

Observations from the focus groups themselves comport with these quantitative findings. Some participants drove significant distances to attend; two came from neighboring states, an hour or more from Boston. Most clearly enjoyed talking about politics and were interested in it. Of course, the quantitative analysis shows that political interest influenced self-selection at the stage of opting into the focus-group eligible sample, but not the decision to show up after being invited, given that survey respondents as a whole, and especially those who left their contact information, already had high levels of interest in Brazilian politics. One participant remarked that her friend had also received an invitation and wanted to attend but had church-related conflicts on Saturday, underscoring the difficulty of recruiting people who are highly active in their congregations. That said, we did recruit some participants who attend church more than once a week. Gathering a set of respondents that spans the range of relevant variables is generally considered more important in focus group research than recruiting one that is representative (Barbour, 2018; Krueger and Casey, 2014).

Based on this analysis, it appears that different factors influence the decision to opt into a focus group-eligible sample and to attend once invited. Variables associated with wanting to share one's opinions in a group setting—interest in the topic being discussed, as well as gender—matter for opting in. Once those who express interest are invited to join a focus group at a particular time and place, practical considerations, such as having conflicting commitments on the weekends, influence the decision to participate. In the focus groups conducted for the Boston Brazilians

²Church-related weekend commitments might also explain why non-Christians were more likely to leave contact information.

³Survey respondents lived a median of 12 miles from focus group locations and probably took around 3 hours out of their day (including travel time) if they chose to participate. At the IRS mileage reimbursement rates and Massachusetts minimum wage, this works out to approximately the \$50 offered.

Table 2: Predictors of Boston Brazilians Project Focus Group Selection

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Left Contact Info	Attended Invited
Distance (Log)	−0.09 (0.07)	−0.16 (0.27)
Arrival Year	0.01 (0.01)	−0.08 (0.05)
Evangelical	0.14 (0.25)	1.72 (1.02)
Non-Christian	0.67* (0.31)	
Church Attendance	0.13 (0.09)	−1.54* (0.71)
Political Interest	0.45*** (0.14)	−0.45 (0.46)
Bolsonaro Voter	0.33 (0.25)	
Male	0.48* (0.20)	0.17 (0.82)
Age	0.002 (0.01)	0.01 (0.05)
Nonwhite	0.10 (0.21)	−0.53 (0.88)
Education	0.07 (0.07)	0.29 (0.29)
Income	−0.11 (0.09)	−0.25 (0.36)
Observations	465	107
Log Likelihood	−299.09	−28.65
Akaike Inf. Crit.	628.18	83.31

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Group fixed effects estimated but not reported. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

project, concerns about selection bias are relatively minor, though in analyzing the focus group data, one might put greater weight on the opinions of those in the highest category of church attendance.

3 Conclusion and Recommendations

Diagnosing what drives the decision to participate in a focus group should be possible, and relatively straightforward, for some recruitment methods. Lyall, Zhou and Imai (2020), for example, recruited focus group participants from among subjects in a field experiment, so the characteristics of those who opted in or out would certainly be known. When outsourcing recruitment to a firm or collaborating with an organization that maintains lists of potential participants, one may be able to access de-identified data on the sampling frame from which focus group members were drawn.

In many other instances, focus group participants constitute, often by necessity, a sample of convenience, such that one cannot characterize the sampling frame. For example, Lindsey (2022) asked village chiefs in DR Congo to select local residents for focus groups; drawing up a broader list from which to sample would have impractically lengthened fieldwork. In such cases, scholars should strive to compare the basic demographic and political characteristics of focus groups participants to the broader population of a city, region, or country, drawing on census or survey data. Cyr (2017), for example, notes that her focus group participants were disproportionately well-educated and, in one country, right-leaning; these comparisons allow her to assess any potential biases that might result. One could also compare focus group members to participants in large-N components of the same study. Even without a formal assessment of the selection process, comparing focus group participants to a relevant baseline would be a major improvement over current practice; as noted above, none of the 36 articles examined for this study did so. At the very least, scholars should always report the basic descriptive statistics of focus group participants. This is extremely low-hanging fruit, requiring nothing more than a short survey at the start of each focus group session, but it is not yet common practice.

Finally, all scholars using focus groups should describe their recruitment methods in sufficient detail that readers can understand what was done and could replicate the process if desired. Cyr (2016, 2019) offers a series of valuable recommendations for increasing the transparency and replicability of focus group research; key among these are describing the profile and training of the moderator and the questions used to guide the group discussion. How participants were recruited should be added to the list.

Transparency is a broadly supported norm in political science, especially among the editors of leading journals, and it has given rise to an important set of standards intended to facilitate the replicability of research (Bonneau and Kanthak, 2015; Lupia and Elman, 2014). Some scholars in the interpretivist tradition emphasize an alternative perspective, reflexivity, whereby researchers seek to be honest about their relationship to research subjects and personal role in the production of knowledge (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2016; Soedirgo and Glas, 2020). Reporting how focus group participants were recruited, and who they are in the aggregate, is in keeping with both goals, something that seems particularly appropriate for a method that often bridges the qualitative–quantitative divide.

References

- Barbour, Rosaline S. 2018. *Doing Focus Groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Berinsky, Adam J. 2007. Survey Non-Response. In *The SAGE Handbook of Public Opinion Research*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach and Michael W. Traugott. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage pp. 309–321.
- Boas, Taylor C. 2023. “Replication Data for: Who Participates in Focus Groups? Diagnosing Self-Selection.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* . DOI: 10.7910/DVN/YXILZP.
- Bonneau, Chris W. and Kristin L. Kanthak. 2015. “Data Access and Research Transparency: A Joint Statement by Political Science Journal Editors.” *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 15(4):423–424.
- Caughey, Devin, Adam J. Berinsky, Sara Chatfield, Erin Hartman, Eric Schickler and Jasjeet S. Sekhon. 2020. *Target Estimation and Adjustment Weighting for Survey Nonresponse and Sampling Bias*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Collier, David, James Mahoney and Jason Seawright. 2004. Claiming Too Much: Warnings about Selection Bias. In *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*, ed. Henry E Brady and David Collier. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield pp. 85–102.
- Cyr, Jennifer. 2016. “The Pitfalls and Promise of Focus Groups as a Data Collection Method.” *Sociological Methods & Research* 45(2):231–259.
- Cyr, Jennifer. 2017. *The Fates of Political Parties: Institutional Crisis, Continuity, and Change in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cyr, Jennifer. 2019. *Focus Groups for the Social Science Researcher*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fern, Edward F. 2001. *Advanced Focus Group Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Firth, David. 1993. "Bias Reduction of Maximum Likelihood Estimates." *Biometrika* 80(1):27–38.
- Fowler, Floyd J., Jr. 2013. *Survey Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Geddes, Barbara. 1990. "How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics." *Political Analysis* 2:131–150.
- Gerring, John and Lee Cojocar. 2016. "Selecting Cases for Intensive Analysis: A Diversity of Goals and Methods." *Sociological Methods & Research* 45(3):392–423.
- Groves, Robert M. 2006. "Nonresponse Rates and Nonresponse Bias in Household Surveys." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70(5):646–675.
- Groves, Robert M., Jr. Fowler, Floyd J., Mick P. Couper, James M. Lepkowski, Eleanor Singer and Roger Tourangeau. 2009. *Survey Methodology*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Groves, Robert M. and Mick P. Couper. 2012. *Nonresponse in Household Interview Surveys*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hennink, Monique M. 2014. *Focus Group Discussions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Krueger, Richard A. and Mary Anne Casey. 2014. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Liamputtong, Pranee. 2011. *Focus Group Methodology: Principle and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lindsey, Summer. 2022. "Conflict, protection, and punishment: Repercussions of violence in eastern DR Congo." *American Journal of Political Science* 66(1):187–204.
- Lohr, Sharon L. 2022. *Sampling: Design and Analysis*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC press.

- Lupia, Arthur and Colin Elman. 2014. "Openness in Political Science: Data Access and Research Transparency: Introduction." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47(1):19–42.
- Lyall, Jason, Yang-Yang Zhou and Kosuke Imai. 2020. "Can economic assistance shape combatant support in wartime? Experimental evidence from Afghanistan." *American Political Science Review* 114(1):126–143.
- Malhotra, Neil and Jon A. Krosnick. 2007. "The Effect of Survey Mode and Sampling on Inferences about Political Attitudes and Behavior: Comparing the 2000 and 2004 ANES to Internet Surveys with Nonprobability Samples." *Political Analysis* 15(3):286–323.
- Morgan, David L. 2019. *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morgan, David L. and Alice U. Scannell. 1998. *Planning Focus Groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Särndal, Carl-Erik and Sixten Lundström. 2005. *Estimation in Surveys with Nonresponse*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine and Dvora Yanow. 2016. "Legitimizing Political Science or Splitting the Discipline? Reflections on DA-RT and the Policy-Making Role of a Professional Association." *Politics & Gender* 12(3):E11.
- Seawright, Jason and John Gerring. 2008. "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options." *Political Research Quarterly* 61(2):294–308.
- Soedirgo, Jessica and Aarie Glas. 2020. "Toward Active Reflexivity: Positionality and Practice in the Production of Knowledge." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53(3):527–531.
- Stewart, David W. and Prem N. Shamdasani. 2015. *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Van Ingelgom, Virginie. 2020. Focus Groups: From Data Generation to Analysis. In *The SAGE Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations*, ed. Luigi Curini and Robert Franzese. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Wagner, James. 2012. "A Comparison of Alternative Indicators for the Risk of Nonresponse Bias." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76(3):555–575.

Wallace, Rebecca, Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant and Amanda Bittner. 2021. "Harnessing Technologies in Focus Group Research." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 54(2):335–355.