

Effects of Messaging to Encourage Response to the American Community Survey

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Disclaimer: Any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.



Background & Motivation

- Regardless of its mandatory nature, ACS self-response rates are declining
 - Consistent with general trend of declining response rates to mail surveys
- Reduced rates of self-response are associated with increased operational costs
- Census is investigating strategies to increase self-response rates
 - In particular, research conducted for the Census by the Reingold team, a contractor, examined ways to increase rates of self-response in the ACS
 - Examined the “words, tones, and phrases” to motivate participation, as well as concerns about the intrusiveness of the ACS
 - The research presented here is an extension of this project



Research Questions

- Which messages are most effective at motivating self-response to the ACS?
 - *Stated* willingness to participate in the ACS
- Are reactions to these messages and stated willingness related to attitudes towards federal statistics and / or federal statistical agencies?
 - Privacy
 - Confidentiality
 - Trust
 - Policy makers need federal statistics



Methods

- Gallup Nightly Survey
 - 200 responses daily
 - Subsample of national RDD sample
 - Landline and cellphone
 - AAPOR Response Rate 3 = 8 - 11%
 - Given the low response rate, data is not to be used as official estimates
- Data collected over one month (2/16/2014 to 3/16/2014)
 - Survey included 4 attitude questions, 10 ACS questions, and 14 demographic items



Methods, *Cont'd*

- Respondents were read a paragraph of introductory text that described the ACS
 - Then, asked to respond to a series of ten statements about the ACS
 - Each respondent presented with four of ten statements
 - Randomized order
 - For each statement, asked whether it made them more or less likely to complete the ACS
 - Statements at right are abbreviated
- Determines distribution of fed. funds
 - Is non-partisan and non-political
 - Data influences new roads, schools, hospitals
 - Is the most reliable source for decisions
 - Is a leading source of local information
 - Produces key economic indicators
 - Surveys a small number of households
 - Is expression of patriotism, civic duty
 - Many ways to respond
 - Data is kept confidential



ACS Introduction

The American Community Survey is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. Each year, roughly three percent of all U.S. households are selected at random to participate. The survey asks questions about you and the people in your household. For example, it asks about topics such as your commute time, income, and the age of children. Now I would like to read you some statements and ask if that statement would make you more or less likely to complete the American Community Survey. For each statement, would you say this statement makes you much more likely to complete the American Community Survey, somewhat more likely, neither more nor less likely, somewhat less likely, or much less likely to complete the American Community Survey?



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Questions about Attitudes Towards Federal Statistics

- Trust in Federal Statistics
 - Personally, how much trust do you have in the federal statistics in the United States? Would you say that you tend to trust federal statistics or tend not to trust them?
- Invade or Respect Privacy
 - Would you say that federal statistical agencies often invade people's privacy, or generally respect people's privacy?
- Keep Data Confidential
 - People can trust federal statistical agencies to keep information about them confidential. (*Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree 5-point Likert Scale*)
- Policy Makers Need Federal Statistics
 - Policy makers need federal statistics to make good decisions about things like federal funding. (*Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree 5-point Likert Scale*)

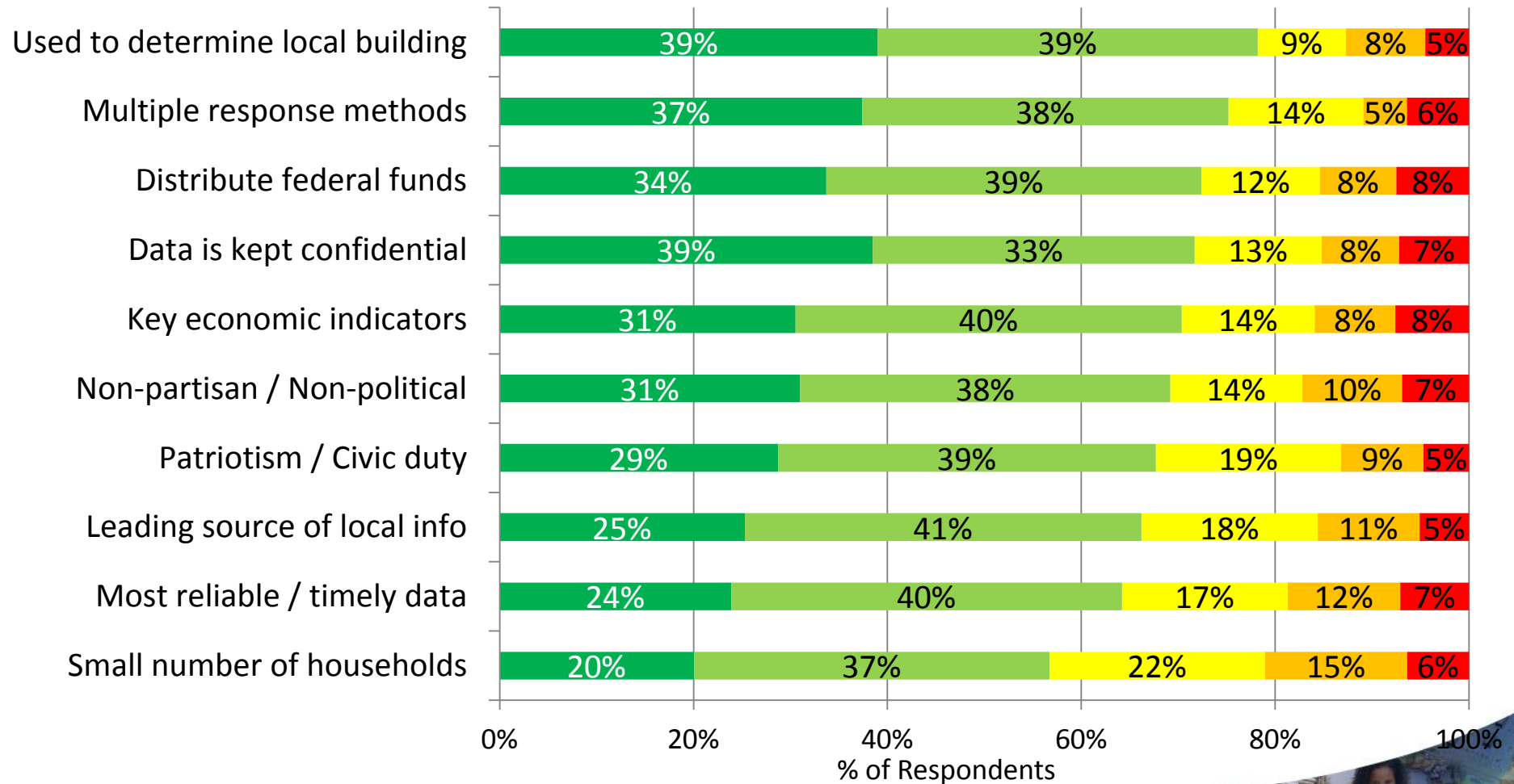


Results

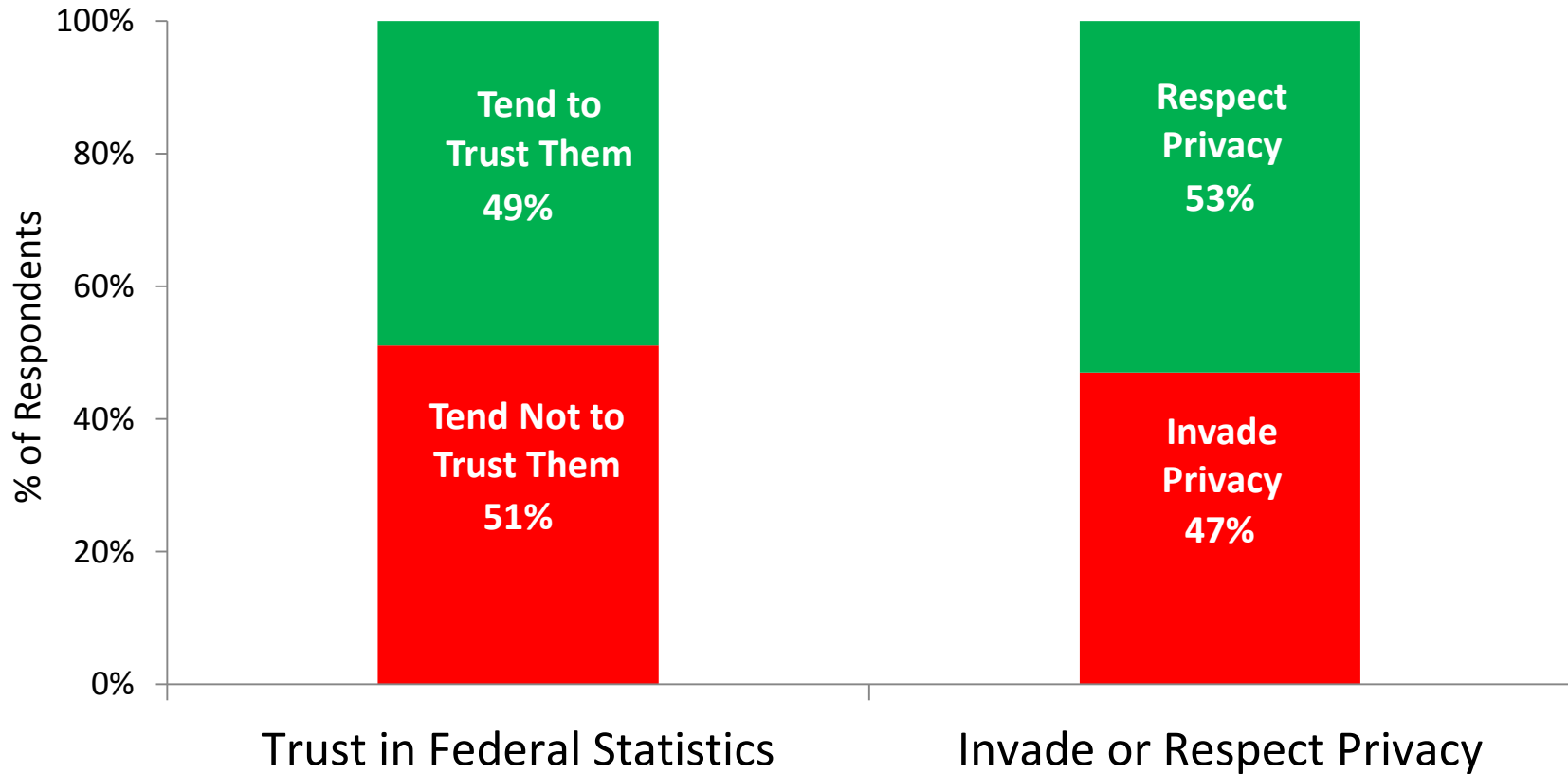


Impact of Messages on Stated ACS Response

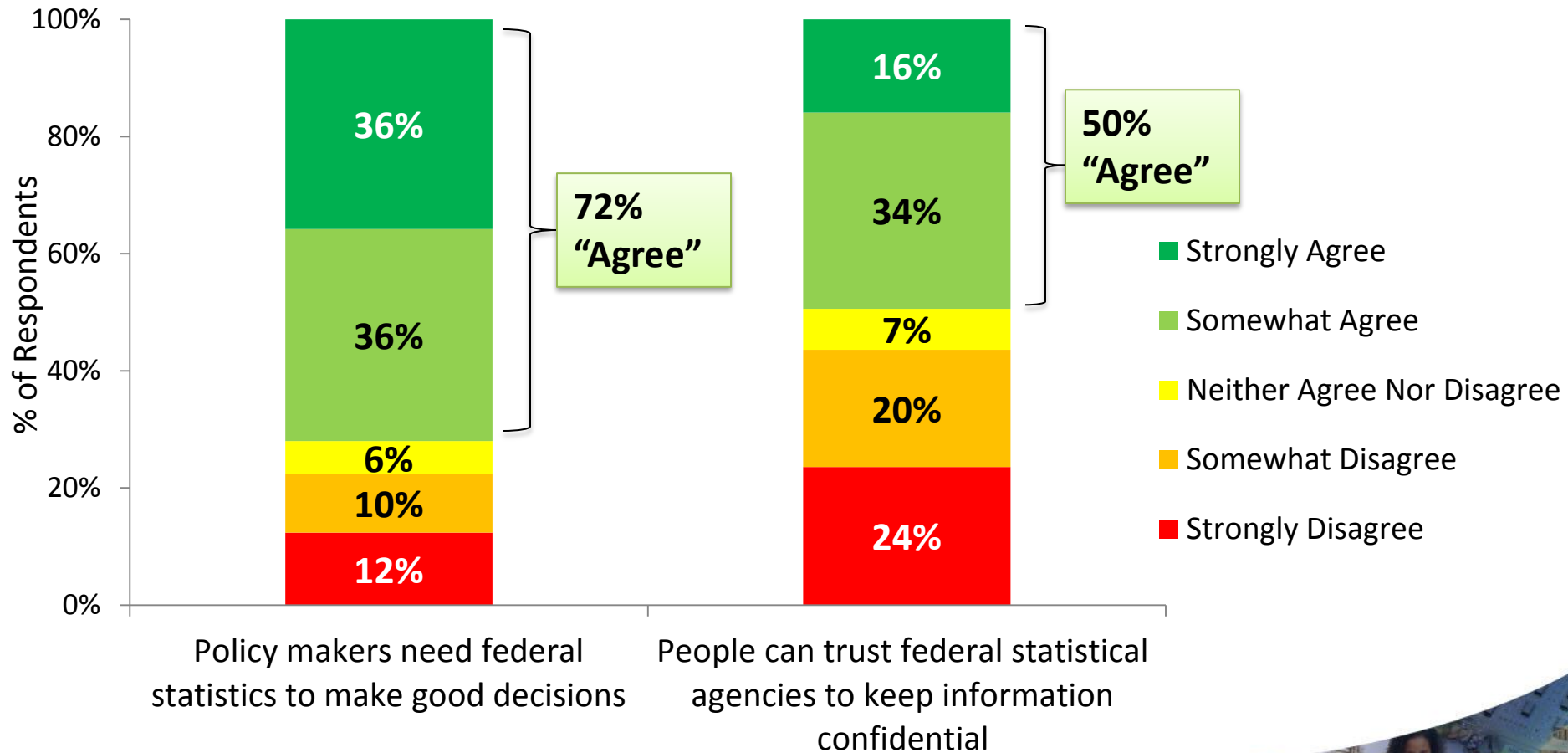
■ Much More Likely
 ■ Somewhat More Likely
 ■ Neither
 ■ Somewhat Less Likely
 ■ Much Less Likely



Attitudes Towards Federal Statistics



Attitudes Towards Federal Statistics, *Cont'd*



Attitudes Towards Federal Statistics Scale

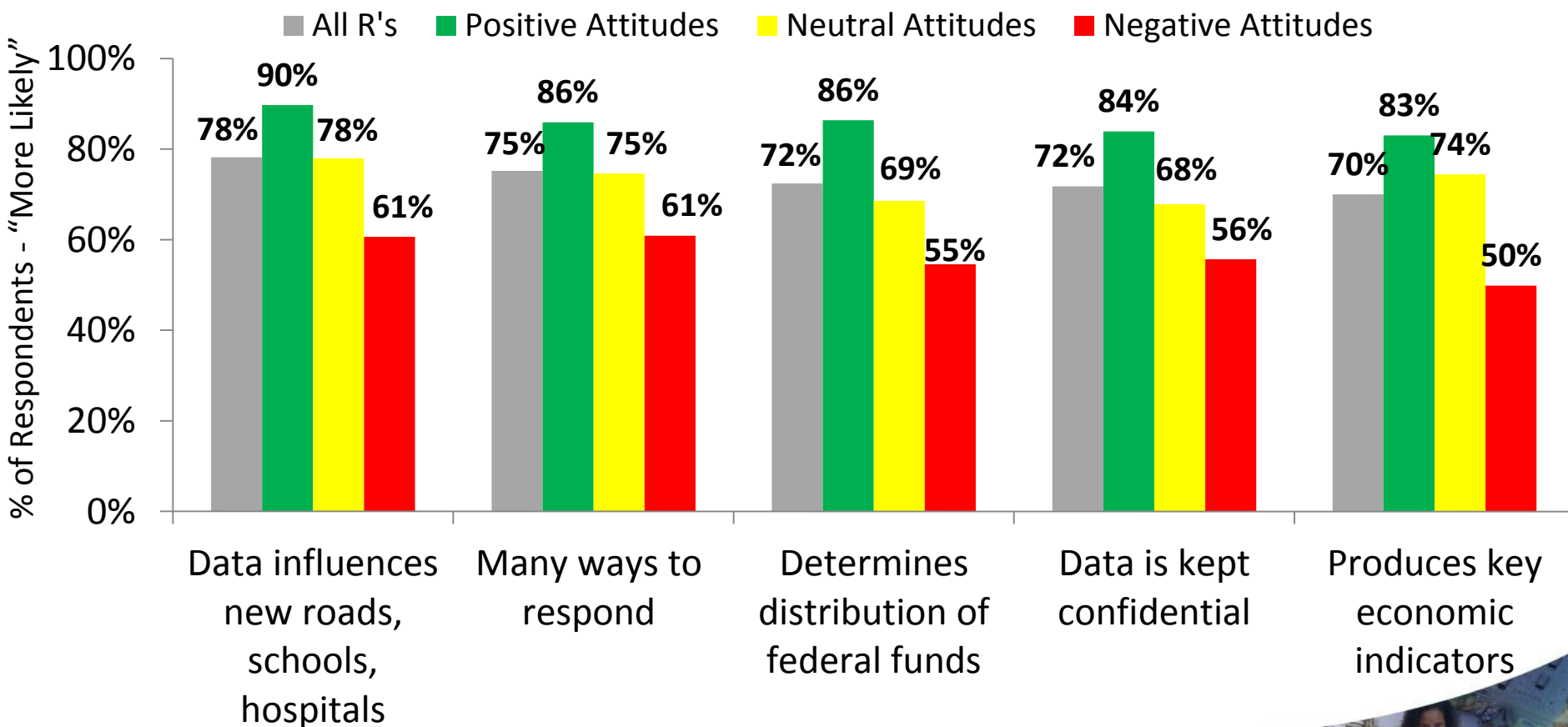
- Created an index by summing responses for each respondent for four attitudinal items
- Sort respondents into those with Positive, Neutral, and Negative Attitudes
 - Positive Attitudes: Score 1 to 4 (51%)
 - Neutral Attitudes: Score of 0 (14%)
 - Negative Attitudes: Score of -1 to -4 (35%)
- Assessed differences in stated willingness to respond to ACS by attitudes using chi-square analyses and Waller-Duncan *k*-ratio *t*-tests

Question	Response Options
Would you say that you tend to trust federal statistics or tend not to trust them?	Tend to trust (+1) Tend not to trust (-1)
Would you say that federal statistical agencies often invade people's privacy, or generally respect people's privacy?	Respect privacy (+1) Invade privacy (-1)
Policy makers need federal statistics to make good decisions.	Strongly / Somewhat agree (+1) Neither Agree no Disagree (0)
People can trust federal statistical agencies to keep information about them confidential.	Strongly / Somewhat disagree (-1)



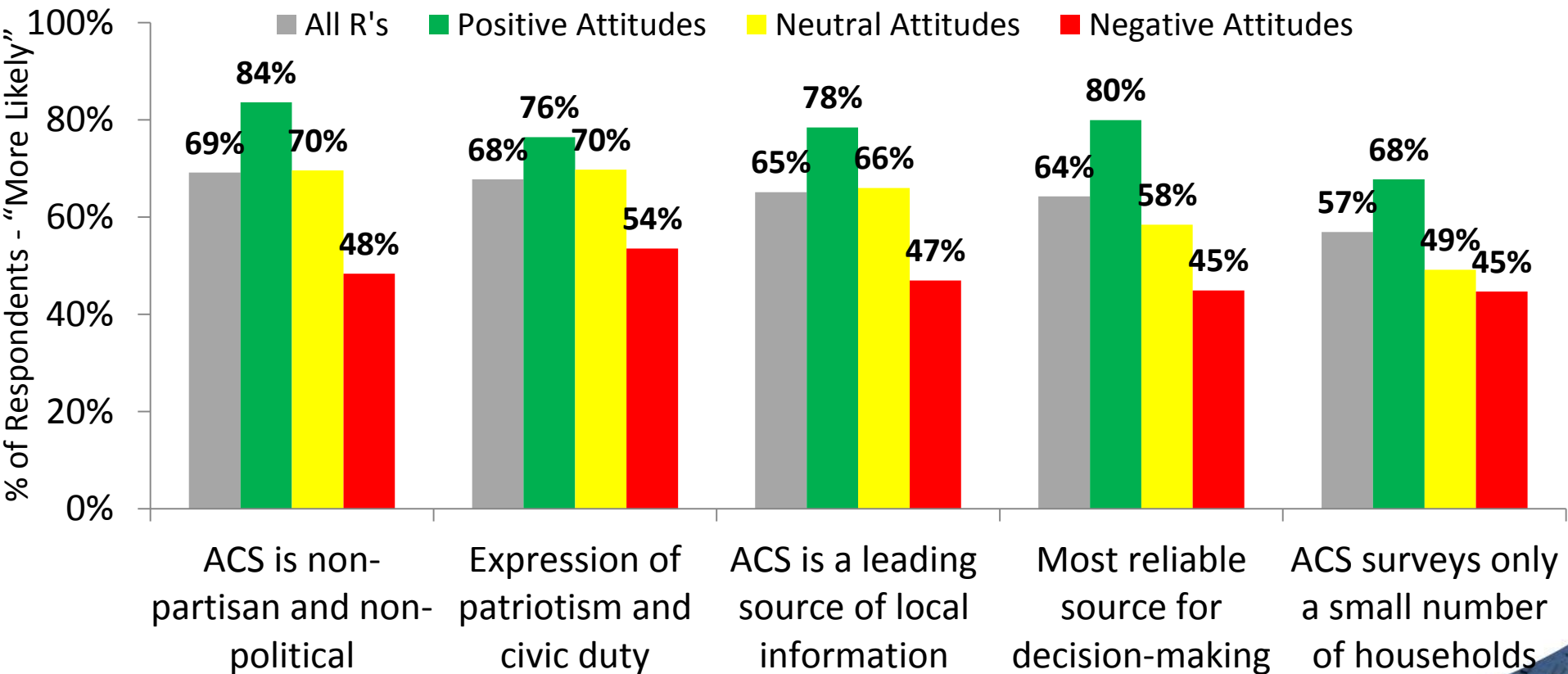
Impact of ACS Messages, by Attitudes Towards Fed Stats

% of Respondents who said “Much More Likely” or “Somewhat More Likely”



Impact of ACS Messages, by Attitudes Towards Fed Stats

% of Respondents who said “Much More Likely” or “Somewhat More Likely”



Overall Conclusions

- Compared to respondents with positive attitudes towards federal statistics, respondents with negative attitudes generally say they are less willing to respond to the ACS
 - True for all 10 ACS messages
- For respondents with neutral attitudes, stated willingness to respond is greater than those with negative attitudes, but not as great as those with positive attitudes
- The appeal of some messages differed by attitudes towards federal statistics
 - “ACS is non-partisan and non-political”
 - Appealed to 84% of those with positive attitudes, vs. 48% of those with negative attitudes
 - “ACS is the most reliable source for decision making”
 - Appealed to 80% of those with positive attitudes, vs. 45% of those with negative attitudes



Overall Conclusions, *Cont'd*

- For all respondents, regardless of attitudes, two messages in particular appear to work best:
 - “ACS data influences new roads, schools, and hospitals”
 - 78% of all respondents say they would be more likely to respond
 - “There are many ways to respond to the ACS”
 - 75% of all respondents say they would be more likely to respond
- Conversely, one message fared poorly among all respondents, regardless of attitudes towards federal statistics
 - “ACS surveys only a small number of households”
 - 57% of all respondents say they would be more likely to respond
- Caveat – research measures only *stated* willingness to respond



Contact Information

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Center for Survey Measurement

U.S. Census Bureau



Appendix



ACS Motivational Frames

1. The American Community Survey helps **determine the annual distribution of more than \$450 billion dollars** in federal funds that go to communities nationwide.
2. The American Community Survey is required by law to be **completely non-partisan and non-political**. This ensures that the statistics the Census Bureau gathers and produce are both reliable and trustworthy.
3. State and local leaders use data from the American Community Survey to **determine where to build new roads, schools, and hospitals**.
4. The American Community Survey is often **the most reliable source** of accurate and timely statistical information essential for decision-making.
5. No other data collection compares to the level of detail collected in the American Community Survey. It is **a leading source of local information** Americans use to learn about their neighborhoods, communities, cities, and states.

ACS Motivational Frames, *Cont'd*

6. The American Community Survey is used to produce **key economic indicators**. Businesses use the American Community Survey to create jobs, plan for the future, and grow the economy.
7. Even though all households participate in the census every ten years, only a **small number of households are selected to participate** in the American Community Survey each year.
8. The census has operated continually since Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and the other Founders established it in 1790. Participating in the American Community Survey is an **expression of patriotism and civic duty**.
9. There are **many ways to respond** to the American Community Survey. It can be completed by mail, by phone, online, or in person.
10. All individual information collected as part of the American Community Survey is **kept strictly confidential**. The answers individual respondents provide cannot be shared with anyone - not even other government agencies.

