

**RESEARCH BRIEF**  
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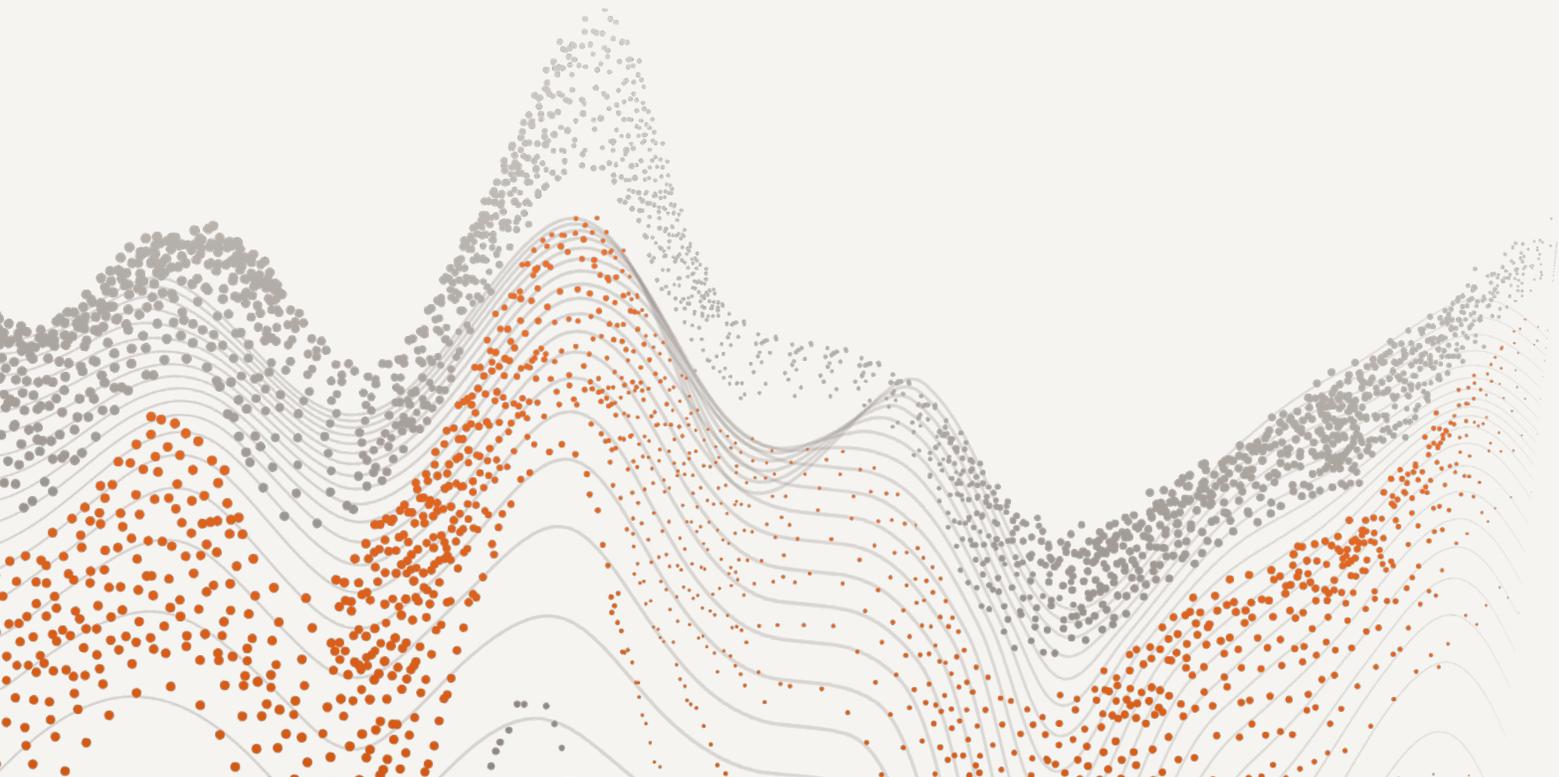
# Analyzing Incentive Form Effects: Evidence from the Religious Landscape Survey

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## Description of the project

The literature on survey research consistently shows a positive relationship between offering incentives and increased survey response rates. However, less attention has been paid to the impact of incentive form—when the monetary amount is held constant—on survey outcomes. This study explores the effects on completion rates and respondent characteristics of offering two equal pre-paid incentives in different forms: one \$2 bill versus two \$1 bills. Using data from the 2023 Religious Landscape Study III (RLS III), we found that offering two \$1 bills led to a higher response rate (7.9%) compared to one \$2 bill (7.2%). Regarding respondent composition, the only statistically significant difference observed was related to educational attainment. Specifically, respondents receiving the \$2 bill were more likely to have a high school education or less, suggesting potential implications for the representativeness of survey samples. Our findings suggest that the \$2 bill may attract a harder-to-reach population, though the difference in response rates is modest—only 2 percentage points. Based on these results, we recommend offering two \$1 bills as a more cost-effective strategy for improving response rates without compromising sample diversity.

## Introduction

In survey research, the influence of monetary incentives on respondent profiles and response rates has been extensively studied. Evidence consistently shows that offering a pre-incentive can significantly enhance response rates and sample representativeness. Two primary theories explain this effect: social exchange theory and leverage-saliency theory.

Social exchange theory suggests that individuals are more likely to respond positively when they perceive the rewards-to-costs ratio as favorable (Dillman et al., 2014). Leverage-saliency theory, on the other hand, posits that the impact of an incentive depends on its perceived value and ease of receipt (Groves et al., 2000).

The form of the incentive also affects respondent behavior. Although the specific impact of using one \$2 bill versus two \$1 bills is less studied, existing research suggests mixed outcomes (Bilgen et al., 2023; Mills, 2019). A \$2 bill, being less common, might signal extra effort by the researcher, potentially increasing response rates due to the norm of reciprocity. Conversely, some respondents might view the \$2 bill as counterfeit, which could deter participation.

Using data from the 2023 Religious Landscape Study III (RLS III), we examine the impact of offering two \$1 bills instead of one \$2 bill as a prepaid incentive on completion rates and respondent characteristics.

## Data and Analysis

Our data come from the 2023 Religious Landscape Study III (RLS III), a nationally representative mixed mode survey of over 35,000 respondents exploring religious beliefs and practices on a variety of measures, such as belief in God and rates of religious service attendance.

The survey of 36,908 adults was conducted July 17, 2023, to March 4, 2024. Interviews were conducted via web, phone, and paper-and-pencil instrument (PAPI), with 25,250 completing by web, 925 completing by phone with a live interviewer, and 10,733 completing by PAPI. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish, depending on the respondent's preference. All respondents were offered a \$10 incentive upon survey completion. The response rate of the survey was 19.4% (AAPOR RR1).

The address-based sample (ABS) was released across two replicates to allow for more precision in hitting the project targets. In replicate I, invitation letters were mailed with one \$2 bill. In replicate II, two \$1 bills were mailed.

## Findings

### Effects on completion rates

Table 1 reports the yields from each treatment for the initial invitation letter. Invitations sent with one \$2 bill prepaid incentive yielded 7.2% completes while invitations sent with two \$1 bills prepaid incentive yielded 7.9% completes.

**Table 1. Yields by Incentive Form**

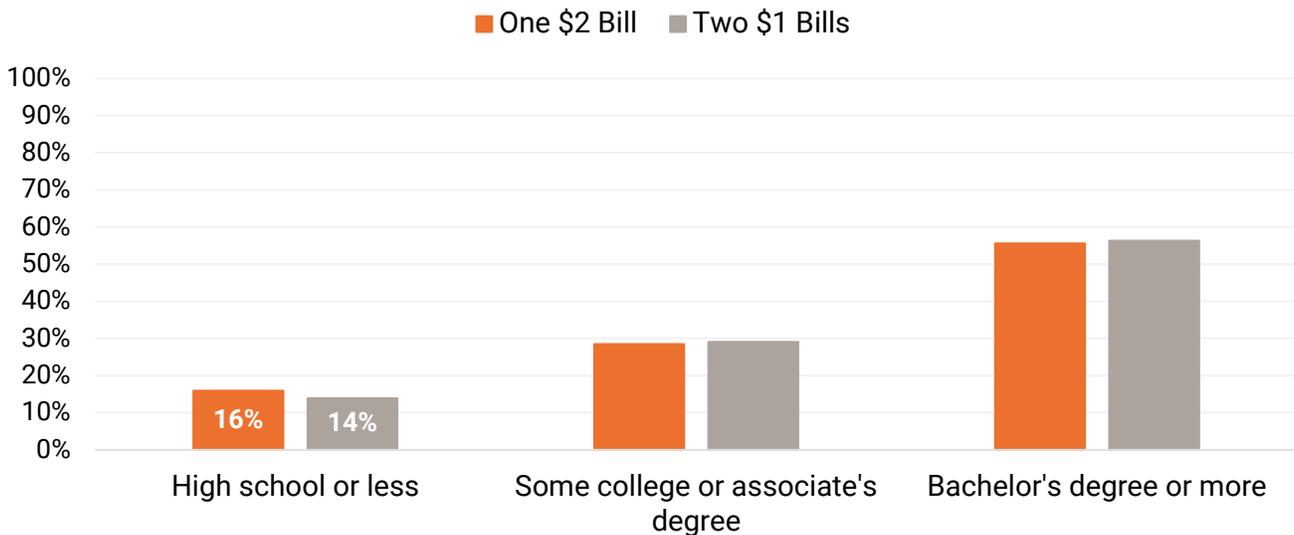
	One \$2 Bill	Two \$1 Bills
Completed interviews	8,162	7,066
Total invitations sent	114,033	89,979
Yields	7.2%	7.9%

### Effects on respondent composition

We also explored the effects of incentive form on respondent composition. Educational attainment was the demographic found to have a statistically significant relationship with incentive form after incorporating a Bonferroni adjustment factor to account for multiple comparisons. Specifically, respondents that received one \$2 bill were more likely to have high school or less as their highest level of educational attainment (see Figure 1).

The relationships between incentive form and other sociodemographic characteristics such as age group, sex, ethno-race, nativity, and voter registration were not statistically significant.

**Figure 1. Educational Distribution by Pre-Incentive Form**



## Conclusions and Recommendations

In this experiment, we explored the effects on completion rates and respondent characteristics of offering two equal pre-paid incentives in different forms: one \$2 bill versus two \$1 bills. We found that offering two \$1 bills led to a higher response rate (7.9%) compared to one \$2 bill (7.2%). However, respondents receiving the \$2 bill were more likely to have a high school education or less, suggesting potential implications for the representativeness of survey samples. No other significant differences were found across other respondent composition characteristics.

Our findings suggest that the \$2 bill may attract a harder-to-reach population, though the difference in response rates was modest at only 2 percentage points. Based on these results, we recommend offering two \$1 bills as a more cost-effective strategy for improving response rates without compromising sample diversity.

## References

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