

PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIFTY-NINTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) focused on “The Image of Public Opinion Research” as a record-breaking 846 researchers gathered May 13–16, 2004 at its fifty-ninth annual conference at the Pointe Hilton Tapatio Cliffs Resort in Phoenix, Arizona. The conference, held in conjunction with the World Association for Public Opinion Research’s conference, centered on “The Image of Public Opinion Research,” and helped the AAPOR Executive Council kick off a campaign to examine what many perceive to be an increasingly negative image of public opinion research—especially of polling and survey research in general—and of those who conduct this type of social research.

The call for papers, posters, roundtables, and panel sessions, issued in October 2003, yielded 390 abstracts for papers and poster presentations, 21 panel proposals, and 9 roundtable proposals. At least three members of the conference committee reviewed each proposal. The results of that review allowed a higher rejection rate than last year and a subsequent return to the format of earlier years: paper sessions (66), panels (16), roundtables (6), and posters (57). There also were four joint AAPOR-WAPOR sessions on Thursday afternoon. The final program listed 282 papers in 82 paper sessions or panels. The conference retained several innovations from last year, including labeling several panels and paper sessions as “invited” sessions to signal their importance. The most heavily attended sessions dealt with methodological issues, especially the challenges that cell phones present to certain kinds of telephone sample surveys. Other sessions that drew heavy attendance dealt with nonresponse, statistical analysis, preelection, and other methodologies.

A number of events helped people attend to the conference theme, beginning with an invited session Friday morning dealing with issues of primary polling in the 2004 election. There were two sessions Friday afternoon dealing with the conference theme, both focusing on how people perceive polls and public opinion researchers. One dealt with primary research AAPOR had commissioned and what the findings meant for future AAPOR efforts. On Friday night, plenary speaker Norman Ornstein reviewed the challenges that survey researchers face. After his challenge, AAPOR incoming president Nancy Belden told the conference that special committees would continue the research outlined earlier in the day on the image of survey research and develop a program to improve that image. The research will be based on the

findings of focus groups held prior to the conference, which suggested that survey researchers, especially those who conduct media polls, suffer from an image of being biased and inaccurate, despite an overall record of accuracy in past years. Finally, a Saturday session heard anecdotal support from a wide range of research practitioners who work with news organizations. These researchers related how many partisans are attacking media polls, alleging that they are biased because of their association with news organizations.

Education and professional development also continued to be the focus for the conference. This year's conference mirrored last year's short course schedule: four short courses on Thursday morning, four on Thursday afternoon, and one on Sunday. Two hundred thirty-five researchers registered for the short courses, a decrease from the prior year. The conference also continued the tradition of hosting a book exhibit, with hundreds of volumes in the social sciences on display. AAPOR's conference also allowed researchers to continue development of other organizations and groups that deal with survey research, including those interested in research on race, nonresponse, and election poll methodology.

Although a latent function of earlier conferences turned out to be one of allowing junior researchers ease of access to senior researchers, conference organizers in recent years have constructed programs to foster that sense of having a "meeting place" for practitioners of all ages and backgrounds. This conference strove to meet that sense of casual informality that often yields productive professional discussions. To that end, the conference offered the traditional Saturday evening events: a dance and "five-card probability session." However, there also was a more formal dinner and social outing at the Heard Museum of Native American Life in downtown Phoenix. The conference also had a record number of golfers attend the Thursday morning golf outing, and more than a dozen early risers participated in the fun run and walk. In addition, there were no speakers at the Friday luncheon and dinner to allow participants time to visit and exchange ideas. There were more vendors and research suppliers who attended the 2004 computer-assisted interviewing and sampling software event, and the tabulation and presentation software exhibit.

Based on the large number of anecdotal remarks, the conference appeared to be an organizational and topical success. However, as the conference grows, organizers will have to take into account the needs of younger members, which was the subject of a roundtable discussion at this year's conference. It also will have to take into account the changing needs of conference attendees in the selection of short courses, recreation, and of course, academic interests.

As in years past, participants will have the opportunity share their views in a post-conference survey. That survey's findings will help the incoming conference chair, Tom Smith, to develop the program for next year's conference at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach, Florida, May 12–15, 2005.

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