

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

The Fifty-Sixth Annual Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) was held at the Hilton Montreal Bonaventure in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, May 17–20, 2001. The conference theme was “Making Connections.” Some eight hundred public opinion researchers accepted the invitation to meet colleagues and friends and to participate in the interdisciplinary program.

Background

The annual conference is AAPOR’s major undertaking. Its special character clearly distinguishes it from other professional meetings. Despite steady growth in attendance over recent years, it is a relatively small conference. Its limited duration, its submission review process, and its carefully variegated slate of paper session topics constrain the number of opportunities for being “on the program.” With the traditional meals and social events, the AAPOR conference presents a higher quality, more intimate, and more interdisciplinary experience than can be found at many academic, governmental, or commercial meetings.

As has been noted frequently in recent years, the advantages offered by the conference format come at a price. The structure of the meeting limits, among other things, opportunities to attract new AAPOR members, the willingness of exhibitors and publishers to display their wares, the range of topics covered in the program, and the conference revenue that AAPOR could employ for worthwhile purposes. The traditional meal plan, with its benefit of interdisciplinary mixing and togetherness, presents a financial hurdle for younger attendees and an inconvenience for more affluent registrants who prefer the cuisine in local restaurants to “hotel food.” Recently, the conference has featured a reduced meal plan in alternate years in an attempt to respond to these concerns. Other limitations of the traditional conference design, like those listed above, are posing significant challenges for conference chairs wishing to balance the benefits of growth with the advantages of a smaller conference.

Planning for the Montreal meeting began in this context, shortly after AAPOR’s 2000 assembly in Portland, Oregon. That conference drew over

seven hundred registrants, in part because of its focus on a new topic of great interest that year—Web surveys—but also because the program was expanded from previous years to include more sessions during each time slot and more papers per session. Conference chair Mark Schulman had struck a new balance in favor of growth, bringing in many first-time participants, charging exhibitors for the first time to reach the AAPOR audience, and collecting substantially more conference revenue.

A postconference survey of registrants revealed a generally positive reaction to the larger conference (despite the problems with registration at the main conference hotel and the awkward layout of the meeting rooms). The level of attendance did not appear to have eclipsed the traditional character of the meeting, though there were some complaints about too many presentations in some sessions. When probed about the possibility of expanding the meeting to include more short courses, a sizable number of respondents said that they were likely to attend. Overall, the survey indicated a robust positive sentiment for the conference and suggested that further growth experimentation was possible.

But the likelihood of hosting a meeting in Montreal the size of the Portland conference was by no means certain. Unlike Portland, the Montreal conference was less likely to benefit from the Internet survey “buzz” (particularly after the plummet in prices on the NASDAQ). Further, the Canadian venue posed attendance questions; it was not clear, for example, whether government employees might face travel restrictions or whether the faltering economy would constrain participation. Then there were the perennial concerns about maintaining the quality of the program, a goal that often trades off against higher attendance.

While we budgeted conservatively, projecting a lower attendance than the Portland conference, we undertook a number of steps to attract participants—particularly first-time attendees from Canada—to the conference. The number of short courses was increased from three to seven, including four on Thursday, two on Sunday, and one on Friday evening. A large (40-member) Conference Committee was recruited, including a number of Canadian AAPOR members, who played an important role in generating program ideas and promoting the meeting. The Call for Participation emphasized topics that might serve to connect Canadian and American researchers—for example, issues involved in questionnaire translation, election polls, and census research. Contacts were made with the Professional Market Research Society in Canada to advertise the meeting and invite participation.

The Call for Participation, distributed in September 2000, brought in well over three hundred submissions to the AAPOR Web site in mid-December, including a substantial number of panel ideas. Members of the Conference Committee graciously gave time during the holiday season to review the large number of abstracts, using the AAPOR Web site reviewing system

designed by Mei Lu, our Webmaster. With many excellent proposals in hand after the reviews, it was clear when Associate Chair Dick Kulka and I met in January that there was more than enough material for a full conference program.

The question remained just how “full” the program should be. Consulting with Conference Operations Chair Paul Beatty and Associate Chair Shap Wolf, we received the fortuitous news that it was possible to schedule seven concurrent sessions in each time slot because of the hotel’s well-designed meeting facilities. The fact that there were seven large adjacent “break-out” rooms available in addition to a very large exhibit hall enabled us to accommodate more paper sessions and poster presentations comfortably than has been the case in other meeting venues. Even with seven sessions, conferees could still hopscotch between meeting rooms without difficulty to catch papers on different topics. Thus, largely because of the prescience of the Conference Operations Committee in selecting this meeting site several years earlier, we were able to attempt to address the competing goals of growing participation and maintaining the conference’s more intimate character.

Program Features

The outcome of this planning was a conference with 62 paper sessions and roundtables and three poster sessions that accommodated over 60 poster presentations. (By comparison, the Portland meeting had included 64 paper sessions and roundtables and 40 poster presentations.) With a few exceptions (made reluctantly), paper sessions in Montreal consisted of four papers and a discussant’s remarks. While this format lessened the opportunity for people to be on the program, it responded to concerns expressed after the Portland conference that five-paper sessions do not allow sufficient time for each paper. Discussants for each panel were handpicked largely from a list of knowledgeable researchers assembled by Kulka and from a group of volunteers, whose fit to each panel was determined by the conference chair. We felt it particularly important to have a discussant with requisite expertise for each paper session, and this goal was largely achieved.

Conferees sometimes complain about the fact that there are multiple paper sessions that they would like to attend scheduled at the same time. Such complaints are positive signs to the extent that they indicate that there is a surfeit of good material in the program. Each time slot *should* contain a number of attractive sessions. A problem arises, however, when the complaints signal an overlap in the topics covered by sessions scheduled at the same time. We tried to minimize such overlaps by identifying popular topics and slating one session for each in every time slot in the program. For example, most time slots had one session devoted to Web or other mode-

effects papers, one to nonresponse issues, one to cognitive interviewing or pretesting or questionnaire development, one to election polling issues, and so forth.

The conference featured one plenary session on Thursday, allowing attendees to use Friday night for dinner at one of Montreal's fine restaurants and the baseball game between the Montreal Expos and the San Diego Padres. The plenary was a stimulating panel on "Lessons from Election Night 2000." Responding to the charge of the conference chair, Murray Edelman ("Lessons for the Survey Profession"), Kathy Frankovic ("Lessons for the News Media"), and Don Dillman ("Lessons for Ballot Designers") recounted problems with election projections, media coverage, and ballot design in the 2000 presidential election and what we should learn from them. Michael Adams, president of the Environics Research Group, provided a lighthearted discussion of the three presentations from a Canadian perspective.

The seven short courses in Montreal featured three courses on questionnaire design and pretesting by Jon Krosnick, Roger Tourangeau, and Jack Fowler, two on sampling and imputation by Colm O'Muircheartaigh and Jill Montaquila, one on Web survey design by Mick Couper, and one on media coverage of public opinion by Mike Traugott. In all, these professional development offerings, organized by AAPOR Education Committee Chair Tom Guterbock, drew 440 attendees. Anecdotal reports after the conference suggested that some conferees came to the meeting solely for the short courses, an indicator of their potential value for future conference organizers.

Interested readers can refer to the conference program in this issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly* for information on the various sessions. Briefly noting some of the panels, Claire Durand (author of the "Montreal Chronicles" on AAPORNET) organized a session comparing Canadian and American preelection polls; Richard Day brought together representatives from the Council of American Survey Research Organizations, the Council of Social Science Associations, and AAPOR to discuss "threats to survey research"; Janice Ballou organized a roundtable discussion of AAPOR's "Standard Definitions" for reporting nonresponse information; and Warren Mitofsky organized a panel on the Mexican election of 2000. A special session on sampling and coverage issues was held in honor of Leslie Kish, who passed away recently, and Diane O'Rourke organized a panel on the contributions of Seymour Sudman to survey research. Alisu Shoua-Glusberg and Sylvia Fisher organized panels on issues in translating questionnaires, and Miguel de la Puente brought together American and Canadian census researchers to discuss issues in enumerating small population subgroups.

At this writing, abstracts for the papers and poster presentations are available, along with author e-mail contact information, on the AAPOR Web site. As in 2000, the business of presentation proposal submission, reviewing, and program organization was accomplished electronically; we processed

no “hard copy” proposals through mail or fax. This technological advantage made it possible for the conference chair and two part-time assistants, Katherine Jackson and Liliana Palomo-Pujol, to organize and index the program and presentation abstracts and to communicate with the many presenters in a timely manner. Once the program file was transmitted to Ann Arbor, MI, Marlene Bednarz, Karen Hasin-Bromley, and Mei Lu handled the printing and electronic display of the program on the Web site. Bednarz and Hasin-Bromley also coordinated the numerous details involving conference registration and administration.

As noted above, Conference Operations Chairs Paul Beatty and Shap Wolf worked with the Hilton Bonaventure staff to arrange for the setup of the rooms for all of the sessions and social events, and for food and drink at the communal meals. Their on-site work followed months of preconference effort. Carl Ramirez negotiated the contract for audio-visual services and supervised the work of the contractor. For the first time, AAPOR provided data projectors to presenters who requested them at the time of proposal submission. Janet Streicher and Patricia Moy, chairs of AAPOR’s new Exhibit Committee, recruited and managed relations with technology and book exhibitors. Their work resulted in the presence of 14 technology exhibits and books from around ten publishers for perusal of the conferees. Susan Pinkus and Kat Lind arranged for the important social events at the meeting, including the Friday evening baseball outing and the Saturday night disco party.

At the Saturday awards banquet, Daniel M. Merkle, chair of the Student Paper Award Committee, presented the student paper award to Joshua Clinton of Stanford University. The AAPOR Innovators Award was received by Douglas Rivers on behalf of Knowledge Networks. Murray Edelman presented the AAPOR Award, recognizing lifetime achievement, to Robert Groves.

Final Accounting

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, about eight hundred conferees—the largest number in AAPOR history—registered for the opportunity to attend the Montreal conference. Commercial researchers were the largest group (306), with academics slightly behind (298). Government and non-profit organization researchers numbered 140, while nearly sixty media researchers and others were in attendance. Nearly fifty Canadian researchers attended the meeting, the great majority of them for the first time. In all, 243 of the conference registrants were first-time attendees.

Balancing the size and the traditional character of the conference will continue to be a major concern for AAPOR. It is important for more researchers to learn the benefits of AAPOR, to partake in its culture, and to

adopt its code of ethics and professional responsibility. The annual conference can serve as a good introduction to prospective members. At the same time, AAPOR's meeting should not come to resemble academic gatherings that last for a week and schedule paper sessions far into the night that few people attend. Conference chairs will need to meet the challenge with innovative scheduling ideas and new uses of technology and facilities. We wish them well in this important work.

PETER V. MILLER
Conference Chair