

## **PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIFTY-FIRST ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH**

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The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and held its fifty-first annual conference May 16–19, 1996, at the Red Lion Hotel in Salt Lake City, Utah. In keeping with tradition for conferences held during even-numbered years, the conference site was shared by the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), whose conference ran May 15–17. Joint AAPOR/WAPOR activities included a Thursday night plenary session on deliberative polls, a discussion panel providing an international perspective on the future paths of public opinion research, and four joint paper presentation sessions. Official registration was 568 (only one person short of last year's record attendance), of which 454 were AAPOR members. The breakdown of registrants by affiliation revealed 42 percent affiliated with academic institutions; 39 percent commercial; 10 percent government; 6 percent nonprofit; and 2 percent other. Twenty percent of registrants were first-time attendees. A total of 454 people were listed as participants in the joint conference in a variety of roles: session organizers, plenary speakers, short-course instructors, discussion panelists, authors and presenters of papers and poster presentations, session chairs, and discussants.

The AAPOR conference included a record number of sessions (63) distributed as follows: 42 paper presentation sessions; seven roundtable discussions, six discussion panels, four short courses, two plenary sessions, a poster session, and—taking advantage of our conference location—an introduction and tour of the Mormon Family History Library.

The opportunities for continuing education at this year's conference were more extensive than usual, thanks in part to a mandate from AAPOR's council to expand educational efforts at the conference, and in part to AAPOR secretary treasurer Nancy Mathiowetz's skills at finding and persuading potential instructors. The AAPOR program opened on Thursday with a 6-hour limited-enrollment short course taught by Colm O'Muircheartaigh and attended by 13 participants, titled "Introduction to Survey Sampling." A 4-hour short course, "Thinking about Answers: The Application of Cognitive Process to

Survey Methodology,” by Norbert Schwarz and Seymour Sudman, was presented to 46 participants on Thursday afternoon. Tom Smith taught a free 90-minute Saturday morning short course describing and demonstrating “The General Social Survey Data and Information Retrieval System” to an audience of about 45 attendees. The final short course of the conference was Mike Weeks’s 3-hour session titled “A Practical Guide to Project Management for the Survey Researcher,” presented on Sunday morning to 70 participants.

The conference included two evening plenary sessions, one on Thursday and the other on Friday, both of them organized and moderated by conference chair Jack Ludwig, of Princeton Survey Research Associates. The Thursday night AAPOR/WAPOR panel grappled with “Deliberative Polls: What Do They Add to Our Understanding of Public Opinion?” The Friday night AAPOR panel probed “The Wellsprings of Political and Social Discontent in the United States: An Historical View.”

The Thursday session on deliberative polls included four speakers. The first was James Fishkin, of the University of Texas at Austin, creator and foremost proponent of deliberative polling, who presented an overview of the rationale for conducting deliberative polls, showed a brief video clip of the one held in Austin, Texas, in January, and recounted anecdotes designed to provide an experiential understanding of the process. The second speaker was Roger Jowell, of Social and Community Planning Research (located in London) who has worked with Fishkin on two deliberative polls conducted in the United Kingdom. The thrust of Jowell’s methodologically focused comments was that critics of deliberative polls have focused on weaknesses that are shared by traditional surveys—especially panel surveys—and that the value of deliberative polls for understanding attitude formation and change has been neglected. The third speaker was Andrew Kohut, of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, who began by praising those who had conceived and conducted deliberative polls for pioneering an innovative approach to studying public opinion. Kohut then summarily compared pre- and postdeliberation survey responses reported in the wake of the Austin “National Issues Convention,” and concluded that instead of proving the superficiality of public opinion as measured using traditional survey approaches, the data provided a validation of the results of traditional public opinion assessment. The final speaker was Warren Mitofsky, of Mitofsky International, who leveled a variety of criticisms at deliberative polls. He charged that the deliberative process was artificial, that the concept of deliberative polls was connected obliquely, at best, to the real-world political decision making of the U.S. electorate, and that the experiment suffered

from the absence of a control group. The session ended with a lively rebuttal and floor discussion.

The Friday night plenary featured Robert Samuelson, columnist for *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*, and author of the recent book *The Good Life and Its Discontents: The American Dream in the Age of Entitlement, 1945–1995*. The author summarized the book's thesis that the decline in Americans' trust and confidence in political institutions and leaders over the past 50 years is a consequence of unrealistic expectations set during a historical period when increases in prosperity, economic stability, and the amelioration of social conditions made the prospect of eradicating social problems and economic uncertainty seem like a realistic possibility. Samuelson argued that the perpetuation of the idea that not only can we achieve this utopian goal, but we are entitled to it, is due in part to the unpalatability of a more realistic stance for political leaders in what he has called the "age of entitlement." The other two speakers, Frank Newport of the Gallup Organization and Michael Traugott of the University of Michigan, brought archived survey data to bear on Samuelson's hypothesis. Newport explored Gallup Poll data on Americans' discontent, underscoring the divergence between Americans' appraisals of their personal situation and their more negative evaluations of political institutions and leaders. He raised questions about whether a culture of unrealistic expectations was the root cause of their discontent, suggesting competing explanations such as revelations of political scandal and malfeasance, and the critical tone of the media in reporting on political events. Finally, he presented data questioning the notion that Americans expect or desire the government to solve some of the country's most serious social and economic problems. Traugott shed an interesting light on the discussion by investigating the question of whether increasing discontent represented a broad national shift in perspective or whether there were differences by cohort that might lead to a clearer understanding of the phenomenon. He presented data suggesting cohort differences. Traugott concluded with the proposition that it would be useful to evaluate Samuelson's hypotheses more directly, but that to do so would require the development of new survey questions and indices. Comments were solicited from the audience, and the session ended with a thoughtful question-and-answer session.

Seymour Sudman presented the AAPOR award for exceptionally distinguished service to Eleanor Singer at Saturday evening's award banquet. The student paper award was presented to Maria Krysan, a new faculty member at the Pennsylvania State University, for her paper, "Experiments, Quasi-Experiments, Surveys, and Depth Interviews: A Multi-Method Approach to Understanding White Racial Attitudes." Additionally, two papers were cited for honorable mention

in the competition: "African American Realignment: 1937–1965," by Daniel Dowd of Yale University, and "Yet Another Gender Gap: Reporting Housework Contributions," by Julie Press and Eleanor Townsley of the University of California, Los Angeles. Krysan and Dowd presented their papers in sessions at the conference.

Several sessions focused on the future of our discipline and our organization, topics especially appropriate in view of the conference's fiftieth-anniversary theme: two discussion sessions (one a joint AAPOR/WAPOR panel) focused on the future of public opinion research, and another on the results of the AAPOR membership survey intended to provide guidance for the future direction of the organization. A Friday discussion panel titled "Push Polls and Truth in Polling Laws: How Shall We Respond?" organized by Thomas Guterbock, attracted many attendees. In addition to a lively discussion about this threat to our industry (at which AAPOR's position paper on push polling was made available), it generated a story printed in the *New York Times* the following week and a number of calls to AAPOR to report suspected instances of the practice.

Another highlight of the conference was Peter Miller's Friday night dinner presentation, lampooning many AAPOR notables. Many conference attendees took advantage of the technology exhibit engineered by Robert Lee of Pace University and the book exhibit and sale organized by Phyllis Endreny. Michael Traugott and Murray Edelman assembled a *Fiftieth Anniversary Commemorative Booklet*, provided to all conference registrants, filled with AAPOR history and special citations to friends, mentors, and colleagues. In addition, a copy of the 1946 Central City Conference program was included with the conference registration materials.

Many people worked together to make this year's conference a success. In addition to those mentioned above, special gratitude must be expressed to Marlene Bednarz, AAPOR secretariat, for unflagging support and assistance at many points; to Paul Lavrakas, Dawn Von Thurn, and Jenna Powell of the Site Selection and Coordination Committee, who with grace and good humor handled the daunting task of coordinating the ever-changing details of the conference with the hotel; to Jennifer Dykema, who organized the Fun Run/Walk, slogan contest, and T-shirt sale; and to Rob Daves, who organized the golf outing. Roger Tourangeau, AAPOR's 1997 conference chair, selected and chaired the Student Paper Competition Committee and was one of three people who joined me for an invaluable daylong meeting in Princeton, New Jersey, last winter to evaluate the unprecedented number of submissions for this year's conference and to sort them into topical sessions. Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, and Frank Newport are the other members of this group. Judy Johnson, Jeanne Howarth, and

Connie Keefe provided varied and essential assistance with creation of conference databases, various mailings, and the assembly of the conference program. In the end, of course, the success of this year's conference was the result of the energy and enthusiasm of the speakers, presenters, organizers, discussants, chairs, and participants who contributed their work and ideas to an extraordinarily rich fiftieth-anniversary conference program.

JACOB LUDWIG  
*Conference Chair*