

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

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The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) held its fifty-eighth conference in Nashville on May 15–18, 2003. It was dedicated to the memory of survey research pioneer Bud Roper. The conference program included a wide range of topics of central interest to survey researchers and public opinion scholars.

Many of the presentations addressed one of the three major themes of the event:

*Public opinion formation, change, and effects.* The conference was rich with discussions of how public opinion is shaped (both cognitively and socially) and its consequences for individuals and collectives.

*Survey methodology, especially response rates.* Numerous presentations of many types addressed all aspects of survey research methodology. A major focus was on response rates in federal government surveys, in commercial surveys, and in academic surveys, highlighting response rates currently being obtained, recent trends in those rates, explanations of those trends, and the impact of those rates on sample representativeness. In addition, presentations addressed (1) Internet- and Web-based data collection; (2) interviewer selection, training, and attrition-retention; (3) the use of respondent and interviewer incentives; (4) response and nonresponse error stemming from questionnaires, interviewers, and survey modes; (5) sampling design; (6) statistical data management, analysis, and presentation; (7) pretesting, cognitive interviewing, focus groups, and qualitative research; (8) legislative and regulatory (e.g., institutional review boards) threats to survey and public opinion research; (9) privacy and confidentiality of survey data; and (10) the use of surveys for juror selection, legal strategy, and testimony in court.

*Trust in American life.* A stream of presentations addressed the major substantive focus of the conference: trust. Foci included trust in government, businesses, the judicial system, the law enforcement and intelligence communities, the stock market, the economy, the military, the electoral system, Congress, and the presidency; individuals' and social groups' levels of trust in one another; and trust from all quarters in the methodologies and quality indicators of survey research.

The conference program included 194 oral paper presentations, 6 roundtables, 101 poster presentations, and 57 interactive paper presentations. The

total attendance at the conference was 760 people, and there were 341 registrations for short courses.

In order to accommodate as many papers on the program as possible, a number of innovative steps were taken. First, the paper sessions began on Thursday, May 15, in the afternoon rather than Friday morning. Second, the “Interactive Paper Presentation Sessions” were created. These were thematically organized sessions in meeting rooms—they were essentially poster sessions without the posters. Presenters brought abbreviated or full copies of their papers to distribute and were available to discuss their work with others who visited the session. This permitted the inclusion of a much larger number of papers on the conference program.

A remarkable array of short courses were assembled by Allan McCutcheon and his committee. The instructors for these courses were a veritable who’s who of top names in survey research methodology. They included:

- “Wake Up to the Possibilities of Data Mining,” by Nancy Morrison (SPSS MR) and Amy Sherek (GfK Database Solutions);
- “Graphical Presentation of Data for Survey Researchers,” by Howard Wainer (National Board of Medical Examiners and the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania);
- “It Takes More than Words to Write a Question: How Visual Layout Affects Answers to Mail and Internet Surveys,” by Don Dillman (Washington State University);
- “A Practical Guide to Project Management for the Survey Researcher,” by Mike Weeks (Research Triangle Institute);
- “The Who, Why, and How of Survey Nonresponse and Nonresponse Reduction,” by Robert Groves (University of Michigan and University of Maryland);
- “The Psychology of Survey Response: Lessons for Questionnaire Design,” by Roger Tourangeau (University of Michigan and University of Maryland);
- “Sampling Methods for Survey Researchers,” by Jim Lepkowski (University of Michigan and University of Maryland);
- “Latent Class Analysis with Some Applications to Market Segmentation,” by Jay Magidson (president, Statistical Innovations);
- “Designing Effective Survey Instruments for the Web,” by Mick Couper (University of Michigan and University of Maryland).

All short courses lasted half a day, and courses were offered Thursday morning, Thursday afternoon, and Sunday afternoon.

The conference featured two plenary sessions. The first plenary speaker was Richard E. Petty, Distinguished University Professor of Psychology, The Ohio State University. Petty was the 2003 Decade of Behavior Distinguished Lecturer. This lecture is made possible by an award from the Decade of Behavior Program as a result of AAPOR’s success in their annual competition

(see <http://www.decadeofbehavior.org>). Petty is a world authority on attitude formation and change, and he presented a lecture on social psychological research illuminating the origins and dynamics of public opinion.

Petty's lecture presented a review of his research program, which explores two personality dispositions of people that have potential value for the study of public opinion through surveys. Some people navigate through the world forming opinions about almost everything they encounter, whereas others observe the world around them without forming opinions nearly so often. These groups are referred to as people who are high and low in "need to evaluate," respectively. Some people form most of their opinions thoughtfully, whereas others usually form their opinions with very little thought. These groups are referred to as people who are high and low in "need for cognition," respectively. Petty described his research, which shows how need to evaluate and need for cognition shape the ways that people's opinions are formed and change, how strong people's opinions are, how much their opinions affect their behavior, and how much their opinions are biased by cognitive and circumstantial forces. Thus, Petty's lecture built bridges between the study of public opinion and basic psychological theories of personality and information processing, highlighting the potential for psychology to offer new hypotheses to be studied through surveys.

The second plenary speaker was Arianna Huffington, a nationally syndicated newspaper columnist and the author of nine books on such topics as political leadership, the life of singer Maria Callas, Greek myths, Pablo Picasso, corporate greed, and political corruption. Huffington is known for her critical analysis of surveys and their impact on public policy making.

In her Friday evening lecture, Huffington appealed to AAPOR members to guard against the misuse and misinterpretation of survey data and the trivialization of complex public policy issues when designing questions. Following her remarks were commentaries presented by Robert Shapiro (Columbia University, and an expert on politicians' uses of surveys), Roger Tourangeau (University of Michigan and University of Maryland, and an expert on survey research methodology), and Richard Morin (the *Washington Post*, and an expert on survey research-based journalism). The discussants challenged Huffington's published assertions that politicians are addicted to the practice of conforming to recent survey results when making public policy; that surveys are unreliable because of low response rates, question wording effects, and question order effects; and that survey accuracy has been dropping. The discussants also highlighted the widespread impact that would be observed if Huffington's crusade to end polling were to succeed.

Another feature of the conference was a series of "invited presentations" on cutting-edge and broadly interesting topics. Richard Curtin (research scientist at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research) reviewed the history of response rates of the Survey of Consumer Attitudes since 1978. Tom Smith (director of the General Social Survey and the National Gun Policy

Surveys, National Opinion Research Center [NORC], University of Chicago) reviewed the history and decomposition of recent random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone surveys done by NORC.

Paul Biemer (distinguished fellow and chief scientist in Research Triangle Institute's Statistical, Survey, and Computing Sciences Unit and associate director for survey research at the Howard D. Odum Institute for Research in Social Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) conducted new research exploring the impact of response rates on sample representativeness. Tim Johnson (director of the Survey Research Laboratory and associate professor of public administration at the University of Illinois at Chicago) reviewed recent trends in the reporting of response rates in academic journals.

Shari Seidman Diamond (Howard J. Trienens Professor of Law, Northwestern University Law School, and senior fellow at the American Bar Foundation) and Deborah Jay (president and CEO of Field Research) lectured on the interface of survey research and the legal system.

John Mueller (Woody Hayes Chair of National Security Studies and Professor of Political Science, The Ohio State University, authority on public opinion and war, and author of the book *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*) gave an address entitled "American Public Opinion and Military Ventures Abroad." Steven Kull (director of the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes, author of the book *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism*, and authority on public opinion and foreign affairs) presented evidence documenting Americans' evolving opinions on international affairs.

Jim Fishkin (professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin), Henry Brady (professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley), Shanto Iyengar (professor of communication at Stanford University), and Robert Luskin (professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin) described their recent comparative studies of deliberative polls done face-to-face and via the Internet.

Gary Langer and Daniel Merkle (ABC News Polling Unit) described the procedures used at ABC in differentiating thoughtful, independent studies of public opinion worthy of media attention from imitations that are compromised by inferior sampling, poor execution, or intentional bias.

Warren Mitofsky (president of Mitofsky International) reviewed the performance of the full gamut of preelection polls conducted in 2002, highlighting the dead-on successes and the not-so-accurate numbers to characterize accuracy in gubernatorial, senatorial, and congressional representative races. Charles Franklin (professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin) reported on his analyses of 800 preelection polls exploring time trends in candidate popularity and the impact of poll sponsor and other factors on the results.

Gary King (professor of government at Harvard University) presented the

findings from his research program on how to design survey questions to yield optimally comparable measurements across countries and cultures.

Randall Olsen (professor of economics at The Ohio State University, director of the Center for Human Resource Research, and principal investigator of the National Longitudinal Surveys [NLS]) described a series of experiments carried out in the NLS to identify the best methods for minimizing panel attrition and maximizing response rates.

There were many other terrific sessions at the conference, including the following:

*A memorial for Bud Roper.* On January 20, the survey world lost one of its pioneers, Bud Roper, who died of cancer at age 77. We celebrated his life and accomplishments and reminisced about his impact on polling and AAPOR.

*Interviewer falsification in survey research.* “Curbstoning,” whereby interviewers make up respondent answers, has been recognized as a potential problem in survey research since its inception, and it has given rise to routine supervision and validation efforts. The prevalence, remedies, and policy implications of this important phenomenon were discussed at an invited session on this issue.

*The impact of the Internet on U.S. life.* The social impact of new information technology (IT) on Americans’ daily time has attracted a great deal of press and scientific attention, as some social observers have hailed these developments as eventually equivalent to the Industrial Revolution in affecting human behavior and social structure. This session reviewed data from five U.S. national survey projects using 24-hour time diaries and studying the impact of the Internet on society. These surveys all have a strong and diverse set of measures on people’s daily activities.

*Sampling from lists of registered voters for preelection surveys.* Most preelection surveys are done using RDD telephone methodologies, meaning that researchers must then identify the subset of likely voters. A featured panel described the findings from a new program of research that has been exploring the alternative approach of drawing samples from publicly available lists of registered voters instead.

*Survey data set archives.* The rapid expansion of the availability of digital information via the Internet has significant implications for the practice of public opinion research. This session alerted the public opinion research community to the wide array of resources available in survey data archives and discussed ways to maximize the utility of data archives in public opinion research.

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