

MAPOR

The Newsletter of the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research – Fall 2008

Public Opinion is Normal

By Ward Kay
MAPOR President

As a discussant at last year's MAPOR conference, I made a comment that I believe that public opinion on most issues is normally distributive. I have been mulling that idea over ever since. I want to share my thoughts on this and what it means to MAPOR public opinion researchers whether their interests lie in politics, communications or methodology.

First, by normally distributive, I believe that policy ideas can be thought of as a continuum in which circumstances, caveats and other factors can affect the acceptance of a policy. It will have a mean and a standard deviation around that mean.

However, when we ask about a policy we tend to only ask a single question that ignores the complexity. We know that we can get different results depending on how we frame the question, or within the context that the question asked, or how much information we provide. These differences are ascribed to measurement error or even to respondents with "nonattitudes" answering questions.

Since the 1950s, research has shown that party activists are more extreme in their political views than the typical member of a political party. Similarly, policy activists are more extreme in their viewpoints than the general public. Therefore, many policies that reach the point of being discussed in the public domain tend to be more extreme than public would like. We often think about policy options only being on the extremes and forget that the public is usually between the two extremes. Elizabeth Adell Cook examined the GSS data on abortion and found that majority

of Americans are neither pro-life nor pro-choice, but somewhere in-between, depending on the situation.

The media often feeds into this bimodal thinking by including quotes from extremists on both sides of an issue and claiming that it has provided balanced coverage when the majority of the public thinks both sides are off-the-mark. Public opinion research should educate policy makers that the public is more moderate but we miss that because we don't try to find the mean of opinion. We only measure a "snapshot" of the point of the continuum.

In order to gain public approval for a policy option, the option must come into congruence with public opinion. Congruence can occur two ways: the policy is moderated to become closer to the mean of public opinion; or political communications moves public opinion toward the policy option.

In these partisan times, policy moderation is a rarity. So we are in the heyday of political communications, where party politicians are giving talking points to stay on message. The Daily Show often shows clips of many politicians saying the same phrase such as "cut and run" that shows this process at work. It's been shown that political communications can move public opinion, but if the actual policy is different than the communication presented, the public will eventually react against the policy.

This concept of a continuum is important as we try to measure public opinion. Critics of public opinion research often cite question-wording effects as a problem. But if we consider that different wording is measuring different points on the continuum then the differences are not error or bias but a measurement choice. In

fact, if we were able to construct many subtly different question-wordings we might be able to determine where the mean of public opinion is on the continuum – and that is considerably different than how we conduct public opinion research today.

I would love for someone to lead me towards literature on this concept as I have not found any articulating it this way yet. Until I find an earlier cite, I will humbly propose this as the Kay Principle: public opinion on most issues will be normally distributive when measured on a continuum scale.

Let's discuss this more at MAPOR! Please join me for the President's dinner. We leave from the lobby at 7 pm on Friday.

Let's Do Brunch!

In keeping with the conference theme, "Are You Ready for Change?," the MAPOR Banquet this year will be a brunch on Saturday at 10 am. The day is changed, the time is changed, and the menu will be changed! But the program will remain the same. We will still announce the Student Paper Competition winners. We will announce the newest MAPOR Fellow. And we will be entertained by the featured speaker. This year's speaker is James Innocenzi, a Republican political communications expert, who will talk about "Political Communications in a Difficult Environment." James's talk will feature commercials he has done for Congressional candidates and his perceptions of their effectiveness and ineffectiveness. This is sure to be an entertaining look at how campaigns operate.

Are We Ready for Change?

Public Opinion Research in the 2008 Presidential Election

By Weiwu Zhang

Conference Chair

On Nov. 21 and 22, the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research will hold its annual conference in Chicago, Ill. It promises to be a fascinating one in the midst of a hotly contested election between Obama/Biden and McCain/Palin. Hopefully, the election will be decided by then. No matter what happens, this election will fundamentally change the American political landscape. For the first time in U.S. history, America will elect either the first black president or the eldest first-term president/first female vice president. The theme this year is “Are We Ready for Change?: Public Opinion Research in the 2008 Presidential Election.” The call for papers asked authors to consider various aspects of changes in this historic election such as conceptualizing and operationalizing changes in campaigns, gauging changes in media coverage, and changing ways of voters’ responses to these changes. Researchers responded with a record 101 papers, 14 posters, and 3 panel sessions.

Presenters in two paper sessions will focus exclusively on this presidential election: media coverage of polling performance during the primaries and general election, media coverage of presidential candidates, political advertising, campaign tactics, and age and religious factors in this election.

Other paper sessions will examine the role that Internet and other new media play in public opinion and political behavior, agenda setting, media framing, knowledge gaps, spiral of silence, the role of media and discussion networks in civic engagement, new ways to content analyzing public opinion, the linkage between public opinion and public policy, and public opinion toward various social and political issues. Sessions will also consider several methodological topics in survey design, instrumentation,

telephone and Internet surveys, and surveys on health topics.

In addition to paper sessions, we have two panels specifically focused on the conference theme this year. The first is “Methodological and Statistical Issues in the Study of Change and Causality,” organized by **William “Chip” Eveland** of Ohio State University. Panelists include **David Fan** of the University of Minnesota, **Andrew Hayes** of Ohio State University, **Kate Kenski** of the University of Arizona, and **Fei Shen** of Ohio State University. The second panel that focuses on the presidential campaign is “Explaining the 2008 Presidential Election Using Longitudinal Panel Studies,” organized by **Trevor Tompson** of the Associated Press. Panelists are **Mike Dennis** of Knowledge Networks, **Mike Henderson** of Harvard University, and **Thomas Johnson** of Texas Tech University. The third panel “Theory-based Fiction, or What’s Phil Tichenor Been Doing in Retirement?” organized by **Leo Jeffres** of Cleveland State University, will pay tribute to **Phil Tichenor** of the University of Minnesota, one of the forerunners of the Knowledge Gap Hypothesis. Panelists include **Lee Becker** of the University of Georgia, **Sharon Dunwoody** of the University of Wisconsin – Madison, **Cecilie Gaziano** of Research Solutions, Inc. and Phil Tichenor himself.

This year MAPOR will hold a Saturday brunch instead of Friday luncheon. As is typically the case, the brunch is a pre-paid event (buy your tickets with your registration) that features a keynote speaker and the presentation of the MAPOR Fellow and MAPOR student paper competition winners. The brunch keynote speaker this year is **James Innocenzi**, President of Sandler-Innocenzi, Inc. His topic is “Political Communication in a Bad Environment.” He will offer his insights on how Republican candidates, facing headwinds,

campaign in an environment that overwhelmingly favors Democratic candidates.

Our Pedagogy Hour speaker this year is **Peter Miller** of Northwestern University. The title of his talk is “Learning from Survey Errors.”

The 2008 MAPOR conference dates are Nov. 21 and 22. A copy of the registration form is included with this newsletter. Please use this form to pay for your MAPOR membership, conference registration, and other specific events such as Saturday brunch. Please complete the registration form and submit it to Joe Murphy at your earliest convenience. There is an “early bird” registration rate available, if you submit the form and payment by November 1. Student authors, please note that you are eligible for special rates for the conference registration and the Saturday brunch.

The conference will be held at the Avenue Hotel (formerly Radisson Hotel and Suites) on 160 E. Huron St. in downtown Chicago (<http://www.avenuehotelchicago.com>)

The Magnificent Mile Lights Festival will take place on Michigan Avenue immediately following our conference (A reminder: the parade makes it difficult to get a cab or to get to the trains to make a late flight out). The room rate for a single or double is \$199. To receive the conference rate, make sure you mention MAPOR when you make your reservation. All hotel reservations must be made by October 24, 2008; after that the hotel cannot guarantee our rates. Please contact the hotel directly at:

The Avenue Hotel, Chicago
160 East Huron
Chicago, IL 60611
877-AVE-5110 (877-283-5110)

I look forward to seeing you all on the weekend before Thanksgiving in Chicago!