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## Using Opinion Polls as Predictive Tools

Contributed by Nick Moon, Publications Chair

Polls have frequently been accused of altering people's behaviour in elections, though hard evidence for this is thin on the ground. Less contentiously, and in a non-causative way, it has been shown, perhaps most famously by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, that polls can be quite good predictors of quite different behaviours – polls on consumer confidence tend to provide a good predictor of a country's economic performance a few months down the line. But in an article in Science Magazine, Professors Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova suggest an entirely new use of opinion polls as predictive tools.

Using Gallup polling data from 19 Middle Eastern and African countries where people were questioned about their attitudes towards the US, Russia, the UK, France, Germany and so on, the authors show that there is a correlation between opinion poll disapproval within one country of another country's leaders, and the number of terrorist attacks by groups from the first country on the second.

The authors show that if polls in country A show a 40% disapproval rating of the leadership of country B – a low level of dissatisfaction – then over a 4 year period there are 0.4 terrorist attacks on country B by groups from country A. But if disapproval is as high as 70% - at the higher end of the observed findings – then the number of attacks is almost four times higher, at 1.57 on average over four years.

The data on terrorist attacks came from the National Counter Terrorism Center, which contains information on the groups claiming responsibility and the target of each attack. There were 952 attacks in the period examined by the authors, but 741 of these involved India and Pakistan, and so the authors ran their analysis both with and without India and Pakistan.

The relationship between opinion and attacks is present at a simple two-variable level, but the authors also used more sophisticated econometric analysis, controlling for variables such as population size and GDP in origin and target country, difference between countries and so on.

(Polls continued on page 3)

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**63rd Annual Conference  
 Chicago, IL, USA  
 May 11-13, 2010**

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## Letter from the President

In the northern hemisphere, the summer season is now reaching its peak and those of us who, like I, have the privilege of working in an area where others go to spend their vacation cannot help but feel this especially keenly: through the open window, which is the only thing standing between me—sitting here in my non-airconditioned office directly under the slate tile roof—and a heat stroke, I can hear the laughter of children splashing around in nearby Lake Constance.



**Thomas Petersen**  
President

But even without such images, many of you will now be thinking about your upcoming vacations. And perhaps some of you may even be planning to travel to Greece. Indeed, for public opinion researchers, there is hardly any more interesting place than the country that is rightly referred to as the cradle of democracy. At a conference on ancient history held in Heidelberg recently, archaeologist Ruth Bielfeldt of Harvard University described how public opinion was organized and influenced in the Hellenic city states. Thus, for example, the arrangement of the people and dignitaries at public gatherings, along with the canny positioning of statues of deceased dignitaries at the place of assembly, was used to exert integrative pressure on society and to form the “doxa.” “Doxa”—this strangely enigmatic term can best be translated as “public opinion,” in the sense of an integrative force resulting from the free exchange of opinions and information among the citizens.

Thus, it is all the more surprising to learn that today’s Greece, albeit a stable democracy and member of the European Union, is now one of those countries where measures have been taken to impede survey research—and hence an important element of the free exchange of opinions and information among citizens. Two years ago, our Greek colleague, Maria Karaklioumi, alerted us that the Greek parliament had passed a law that

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“...it is now again forbidden to publish the results of election polls in Greece 15 days before election day. The reason: surveys could confuse voters..”

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not only prohibited the publication of election polls in the last 15 days prior to an election, but that also included detailed regulations as to which methods survey researchers were permitted to use. For example, the law established the minimum sample sizes permissible for election surveys, along with rules stipulating which kinds of analyses could or could not be completed. Moreover, only those methods that had been officially approved by the Greek Office of Statistics were to be allowed.

There is absolutely no doubt that this law not only had the potential to do great damage to the development of social research in Greece, but also represented a serious infringement on the fundamental right of freedom of research and information, while also curtailing the freedom of the press in a completely unacceptable way. Strangely enough, the last point went unnoticed by editorial offices, even

though journalists normally take umbrage at any attempts by the state to tell them what they can report about and what they cannot.

Mike Traugott, the president of WAPOR at the time, contacted the Greek governmental agencies responsible for the law and offered to work together with them in order to amend the law so that it was more in keeping with the requirements of the field. He never received any serious reply. Shortly thereafter, however, the law was at least loosened somewhat, so that publishing the results of election polls was only prohibited in the final 48 hours before an election. Although the reasons for this ban were still incomprehensible, it was nevertheless a step in the right direction in comparison to the prior situation.

Now however, less than one year later, we have received word that the law has been amended once again—and it is now again forbidden to publish the results of election polls in Greece 15 days before election day. The reason: surveys could confuse voters.

Unfortunately, as exasperating as this situation may be, it is not an isolated incident. In so many countries—including many a democracy, which are otherwise rightly concerned about defending their citizens’ basic rights in other areas—the involved parties in politics and the media apparently see nothing wrong with massively impeding a branch of research that can play an extremely important role in the democratic process.

*(President continued on page 3)*

Most of the attempts around the globe to impose limits on survey research are based on two misapprehensions. The first misapprehension is the assumption that election polls influence the opinion formation process among voters. In fact, however, all findings on the issue thus far indicate that this effect is very slight—and even if surveys did exert such an influence, this would still not be sufficient grounds for banning survey results as a source of information. On the contrary: in a free society, voters must have the chance to obtain information on the political opinion formation process from an independent source. And there are good reasons why no one would ever dream of banning all political media reporting prior to an election, even though reporting of this kind has a demonstrable influence on voting behavior.

The second reason for forbidding the publication of election polling results is the assumption that voters could be misled by false forecasts. As a rule, however, surveys conducted in most countries do provide a fairly accurate reflection of the opinion formation process at a given point in time. Even in those few cases where election surveys deviate from the final election outcome, they are still a considerably more reliable source of information than other non-scientific sources. Banning the publication of election survey results essentially means suppressing the only solid source of information available to the public, while leaving the field wide open to speculation. In the process, this also means opening the floodgates for attempts to manipulate the public, since unfounded, potentially biased contentions about the alleged election outcome cannot be corrected via sound scientific data.

A free country needs free survey research. The suppression of survey findings is not reconcilable with democratic principles and is thus unacceptable. In future, we have resolved to join together with other social scientific associations in order to demand more emphatically that the right to free research be respected—and this includes the right to publish the findings of survey research. In a democracy, freedom of research is no less important than freedom of the press.

Best Regards,

Thomas Petersen

It seems unlikely that terrorists are waiting for opinion polls to tell them whom to attack, so what is the explanation for this correlation? The authors suggest a number of possible relationships. It may be, for example, that the opinion poll disapproval level is a proxy for the level of emotional and even material support for terrorist groups. Or it may be that public opinion is merely reflecting the same things that influence terrorist groups.

Either way, the authors suggest public opinion polls can help us understand where terrorist incidents may arise, surely one of the most unusual ways to make use of polls – a far cry from the ephemeral view of an issue that most poll consumers see them as providing.

*Based on the recent article:*

**Attitudes and Action: Public Opinion and the Occurrence of International Terrorism, Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malecková**  
*Science* 18 September 2009:  
Vol. 325. no. 5947, pp. 1534 - 1536.



## WAPOR Elections

**In the next few weeks, you will be receiving biographical information on those candidates who have agreed to be on the ballot for this year's election. Offices being filled for 2010-2011 are Liaison Committee Chair, Publications Chair and Secretary-Treasurer.**

**We will be sending out notices and information via WAPORnet and election materials via post. Please take the time to read the materials and to vote for your candidate of choice.**

**Thanks in advance for your help!**

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Announcement and Call for Papers  
III Latin American Congress  
on Public Opinion  
*"Democracy, the Rule of Law, and  
Social Identities in Latin America"*  
Queretaro, Mexico  
April 15-17, 2010

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The third Latin American Congress of the World Association for Public Opinion Research will take place in the City of Santiago de Queretaro, at the heart of colonial Mexico. The main conference topics focus on an overall evaluation of democracy in the region, as well as the rule of law. In 2010, several countries from Latin America, including Mexico, celebrate the Bicentennial of the beginning of their war for independence, and that year also marks the Centennial of the Mexican Revolution. That is why, in this symbolic year, the conference calls for papers on social and national identities, the persistence of traditions, and changes in the basic values and beliefs of Latin American societies.

The conference organizers encourage prospective participants to cover those topics placing Latin America in a comparative perspective with other parts of the world, but many other topics are also welcome. Among them, the following areas of interest are expected to be part of the conference:

- Political representation and the quality of democracy
- Government legitimacy and political trust
- Public safety and the rule of law
- The effects of the economic crisis on public opinion
- The media and public opinion
- Elections and electoral behavior
- Political parties and ideologies
- Values change
- The meanings of Bicentennial/Centennial celebrations
- The environment, environmental policies and public opinion
- Methodological aspects of survey research

Abstracts from interested parties are due electronically by **November 1, 2009**. Please submit your abstract with the submission form found at the conference webpage (in Spanish, English version to follow):

<http://www.dataopm.net/waporqro/>

If you have any questions, please contact the organizers at:

[wapor2010@dataopm.net](mailto:wapor2010@dataopm.net) and/or [wapor2010@uaq.mx](mailto:wapor2010@uaq.mx)

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Announcement and Call for Papers  
III Congreso Latinoamericano  
de Opinión Pública  
***“Democracia, Estado de Derecho e  
Identidades Sociales en  
Latino América”***

Querétaro, México  
April 15-17, 2010

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El tercer congreso Latinoamericano de la Asociación Mundial de Investigadores de Opinión Pública se realizará en la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro, en el corazón del México colonial. Los temas principales de la conferencia abordan en la evaluación de la democracia en la región así como en el estado de derecho. En el año 2010 varios países de la región, México incluido, celebran el bicentenario de su independencia, y ese año marca también el centenario de la revolución mexicana. Por ello, en esta fecha simbólica, la conferencia solicita también ensayos sobre las identidades nacionales, la persistencia de las tradiciones y los cambios en los valores y creencias básicas de las sociedades latinoamericanas.

Los participantes interesados pueden cubrir estos temas desde una perspectiva comparada y de análisis de caso dentro y fuera de la región. Se espera que en la conferencia sean también abordados otros temas del siguiente listado de áreas de interés general:

- Representación política y calidad de la democracia
- Confianza política y legitimidad gubernamental
- Seguridad pública y estado de derecho
- Los efectos de la crisis económica en la opinión pública
- Los medios de comunicación y la opinión pública
- Elecciones y comportamiento electoral
- Partidos políticos e ideología
- Cambio de valores
- El sentido de las celebraciones del Bicentenario/Centenario
- El medio ambiente, políticas ambientales y la opinión pública
- Aspectos metodológicos de investigación por encuestas

Las propuestas de participantes interesados deben de ser enviadas a más tardar el 1º de noviembre del 2009. Por favor enviar su abstract usando el formato apropiado que encontrará en la página de la conferencia en la siguiente dirección electrónica:

<http://www.dataopm.net/waporqro/>

En breve tendremos la página en Inglés.

Para cualquier duda o comentario por favor contactar a los organizadores en:

[wapor2010@dataopm.net](mailto:wapor2010@dataopm.net) y [wapor2010@uaq.mx](mailto:wapor2010@uaq.mx)



Announcement and Call for Papers  
WAPOR Thematical Seminar  
*“The Early Days of Survey  
Research and Their  
Importance Today”*  
Vienna, Austria  
July 1 - 3, 2010

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Almost a century has passed since the British statistician Arthur Bowley conducted the first survey in the social sciences that was based on a random sample or since pioneers like Max Weber and Adolf Levenstein organized the first scientifically designed mass surveys. 80 years have passed since the first study was conducted among radio listeners and it was more than 70 years ago that the first election forecasts by George Gallup, Elmo Roper and Archibald Crossley led to the breakthrough of the modern survey method. Yet even these events do not represent the very beginnings of our profession. The oldest questionnaire still in existence today, which can be viewed as the first known tool of opinion research—if we use the term a bit loosely—dates back to the year 811.

Despite this longstanding tradition, it sometimes seems as if public opinion research is only concerned with the present. The historical development of the field is hardly ever mentioned, neither at conferences nor in contemporary publications. Public opinion research is neglecting its past.

On the one hand, this is understandable, since a scientific field that deals with ascertaining the opinions of people today naturally tends to look more to the future than the past. At the same time, however, it means that we are failing to make use of a lot of important resources. This is probably why much of the methodological debate today bears a bit of resemblance to the movie “Groundhog Day,” in which the main character gets caught in a time loop and keeps on experiencing the same day over and over again. Instead of building on the insights gained by previous generations of researchers, we all too often find the same questions being posed again and again, the same debates being initiated as if from scratch—and often with no knowledge of what was already said or discovered about the issue in question 30, 50 or even 70 years ago.

The purpose of this thematical seminar, therefore, is to help shake our field out of its tendency towards historical amnesia. And what better place to do so than in Vienna, the city in which Paul Lazarsfeld, Marie Jahoda and Hans Zeisel completed their first trailblazing studies. It was here that they founded the “Wirtschaftspsychologische Forschungsstelle,” it was here that they launched the first studies among listeners of the Austrian radio broadcasting company only a few years after it was founded—work that Lazarsfeld would continue with the “Office of Radio Research” after emigrating to America a few years later. And it was here, in the small town of Marienthal located not far from Vienna, that the first empirical study on the consequences of unemployment was conducted.

Together with the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Vienna and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Charles University in Prague, we want to retrace the roots of our profession and explore the question of what they mean for survey research today.

[See the following page for submission information...](#)

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We would therefore welcome any papers dealing with this issue in a broader sense — i.e. both papers focusing on the historical development of the field of survey research and reports on current studies and advances that incorporate or reflect the traditions established in the early days of public opinion research.

Please submit your proposals — approximately 1-2 pages describing the contents of the proposed paper — by **March 1, 2010** to:

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### *Conferences of Other Associations*

*Note: Previously this feature appeared in the IJPOR, however, due to space constraints in the journal, we will run the calendar in the WAPOR newsletter.*

#### 2009

November 12-15, 2009  
95th Annual Convention of the National  
Communication Association (NCA)  
*Discourses of Stability and Change*  
Chicago, IL, USA  
<http://www.natcom.org/index.asp?bid=11011>

November 20-21, 2009  
MAPOR 2009 Conference  
*Exploring the Future of Public Opinion Research*  
Chicago, IL, USA  
<http://mapor.org/#>

#### 2010

February 4-5, 2010:  
12th Annual Meeting, American Association  
of Behavioral and Social Sciences  
Las Vegas, NV, USA  
Consult: <http://aabss.org/>

May 13-16, 2010  
AAPOR 65th Annual Conference  
*Opportunity through Diversity*  
Chicago, IL, USA  
<http://www.aapor.org>

June 22-26, 2010:  
60th Annual Conference, International  
Communication Association (ICA)  
Singapore  
<http://www.icaheadq.org/conferences/index.asp>

July 11-17, 2010:  
17th World Congress of Sociology,  
International Sociological Association (ISA)  
Gothenburg, Sweden  
<http://www.isa-sociology.org/congress2010/>

*Please let us know about your organization's upcoming event(s). We would be happy to publish them in upcoming issues of the newsletter.*

*Thank you!*

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## Calendar

### **October 1, 2009**

63rd Annual Conference  
*Opportunity through Diversity*  
Call for Papers announced

### **November 1, 2009**

III Latin American Congress on  
Public Opinion  
*Democracy, the Rule of Law, and Social  
Identities in Latin America*  
Abstracts Due (see p. 4)

### **December 1, 2009**

63rd Annual Conference  
*Opportunity through Diversity*  
Deadline for abstract submissions

### **March 1, 2010**

Thematical Seminar (Vienna)  
*The Early Days of Survey Research and their  
Importance Today*  
Abstracts Due (see p. 6)

### **April 15-17, 2010**

III Latin American Congress on  
Public Opinion  
*Democracy, the Rule of Law, and Social  
Identities in Latin America*  
Queretaro, Mexico

### **May 11-13, 2010**

63rd Annual Conference  
*Opportunity through Diversity*  
Chicago, IL, USA

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## Notes

- If you have moved or changed jobs recently, please check our online membership directory ([http://www.unl.edu/wapor/membership\\_directory.html](http://www.unl.edu/wapor/membership_directory.html)) to be sure we have your up-to-date information. If not, please send a message to [renae@wapor.org](mailto:renae@wapor.org) to update the directory.

Thank you!

## WAPOR Directories

Soon you will receive the 2008-2009 Membership Directory in your mailbox. Listed in the directory are people who were members in 2008 and/or 2009. Due to printing and mailing costs, this is the last printed directory you will receive. We will plan on creating a printable version of the membership directory online annually that you can choose to print if you wish. Thank you for your understanding.

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- Do you have an idea for an article in the newsletter?
  - Is there an event happening in your part of the world?
  - Are you interested in organizing a conference?
  - Do you have photos you'd like to contribute?
  - Do you have ideas on how to improve the website or newsletter?

If so, please contact the WAPOR office by sending an email to [renae@wapor.org](mailto:renae@wapor.org) or to Nick Moon (Publications Chair) at [nmoon@gfk.com](mailto:nmoon@gfk.com).

*Let us know your upcoming events.*

*Please note, the deadline date for the  
3rd quarter newsletter is  
October 15, 2009*