

NEWSLETTER

Fourth Quarter

2007

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On the Accuracy of the 2008 U.S. Pre-Election Primary Polls

By Allan McCutcheon

Primary elections have posed a significant challenge this year for pre-election pollsters in the U.S. Unlike those nations in which high percentages of voter participation is the norm, in previous U.S. primary elections only a small fraction of the eligible electorate has participated in the selection of the major parties' candidates for the general election. Typically, the profile of the primary voter in previous years was fairly recognizable—they tended to be those who were somewhat better educated, and who were much more interested in politics than the average voter. Public opinion researchers developed "likely voter" models to select out respondents whom they believed were most likely to participate in the primary elections; the pollsters could then use these likely voter models to filter out the responses of those deemed less likely to vote when developing pre-election estimates of the primary outcomes.

The 2008 primary elections, however, have turned out to be highly untypical. An unpopular war in Iraq and concerns about the economy appear to have energized many who have not been likely voters in the past. In addition, there is the historically unusual situation in which neither a sitting President nor Vice President was seeking one of the party's nomination; the last such occurrence in the U.S. was in 1928. This has led to highly competitive primary contests in both of the major parties. Add to this unusual mix the first time that a woman

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Letter from the President

Public opinion research is alive and well at multiple venues supported by WAPOR and its members. Generally these are the results of significant and successful events held in multiple locations around the world. But there are also some areas of concern that the Council will be reviewing in the current months.

I am writing this column sitting in the waiting area to board a nonstop flight from Chicago to Delhi to attend the WAPOR conference in India organized by Yashwant Deshmukh and his colleagues at the C-Voter Foundation on the theme of "Democracy, Development, and Disasters." This will be the largest assembly of public opinion researchers ever organized by WAPOR on the Asian continent. The program looks very exciting, and the events have been organized in two different cities in northern India.

In the last two weeks, I also finished writing a brief introduction to a volume being prepared for publication by María Braun in Argentina and her colleagues who organized the first comparative conference of Latin American public opinion scholars last spring. This volume contains papers from the best of the presentations made there, and it is a precursor of what is expected to be a series of edited volumes that will follow a planned program of biennial conferences held in the region. They expect it to be available by the end of the year.

As an example of an area of concern, however, we have had a small committee looking at the potential impact of a new law passed in Greece to regulate pre-election polls and the dissemination of analysis resulting from them. We were alerted to a potential problem by WAPOR member Maria Karaklioumi when the Greek Parliament passed a new law prior to the last round of legislative elections, and we have had preliminary discussions about the law among a group composed of Thomas Petersen, Patricia Moy, Maria, and me. The law has two main effects, one of which we support and the other that WAPOR opposes. It requires extensive disclosure of the details of surveys whose results are distributed to the public, generally a good thing. But it also requires pollsters to be registered with the government and prohibits the dissemination of the results of pre-election polls within 15 days of the election. WAPOR has a long standing position on freedom to publish poll results. Based upon the review by this group, I have sent letters to the president of the marketing association of Greece and the Minister of Communication expressing our concern about some aspects of the law and offering to assist in the correction of certain technical issues related to polling in the legislation as well as to discuss our concerns. The committee is also working on a report that will be discussed soon by the WAPOR Council. We will see what response we receive to the letter and factor that into our next set of communications with the marketing association and the ministry. And of course we will keep you posted on developments.

There are two important events coming up that you should think about putting on your calendar. The first is our annual conference held biennially with AAPOR, which will be in New Orleans, Louisiana this year from May 13 to 15. In combination, they provide the opportunity to spend five days in a great venue with an exciting program from the two associations. And of course we will also be holding our biennial conference on survey data quality in Cadenabbia, Italy from July 10 to 12. You will read more about these events in this newsletter. I look forward to seeing you at one or both of these events.



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 .

2008

May 22-26, 2008:
58th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association (ICA)
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Consult: www.icaheadq.org

June 25-29, 2008:
International Conference on Survey Methods in Multinational, Multiregional and Multicultural Contexts (3MC)
Berlin, Germany
Consult: www.3mc2008.de/

June 26-30, 2008:
38th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology
Budapest, Hungary
Consult: www.iisoc.org/iis2008

July 20-25, 2008
26th Congress of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR)
Stockholm, Sweden
Consult: www.jmk.su.se/contents/sidor/english/info/scientific_conference.php

August 6-9, 2008:
Convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC)
Chicago, IL, USA
Consult: www.aejmc.org

September 1-5, 2008:
7th International Conference on Social Science Methodology
Naples, Italy
Consult: www.rc332008.unina.it/

September 22-25, 2008:
Frontiers. ESOMAR Congress

Montreal, Canada
Consult: www.esomar.org/index.php/Congress08-overview.html

2009

May 21-25, 2009:
59th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association (ICA)
Chicago, IL, USA
Consult: www.icaheadq.org

July 2009:
21st World Congress of the International Political Science Association (IPSA)
Santiago, Chile.
Consult: www.ipsa.ca

2010

July 11-17, 2010:
17th World Congress of Sociology, International Sociological Association (ISA)
Goteborg, Sweden
Consult: www.isa-sociology.org



WAPOR Elections

The ballots were counted in December and WAPOR is proud to announce the results of the most recent elections for officers.

The elected Secretary/Treasurer is Allan McCutcheon.

The elected Chair of the Liaison Committee is Marita Carballo.

The elected Chair of the Publications Committee is Nick Moon.

Each of these offices is for a two-year term (2008-2009). Thank you to all of the members who participated in the election, as candidates and voters. The participation rate for the elections was approximately 29%.

and an African-American candidate have each had a serious chance to win a presidential nomination. The results have been an unusually energized U.S. electorate, and the resulting record-smashing turnouts—especially among those participating in the Democratic primaries—for the primary elections of this year.

For pre-election pollsters, this has proven to be a serious challenge. The “likely voters,” especially for the Democrats, in the 2008 primary elections have been anything but typical. Women, younger voters and African-Americans are turning out in record numbers, and this has presented big problems for the traditional likely voter models. This has resulted in a couple of widely-noticed missed predictions among U.S. pre-election pollsters; in New Hampshire, Senator Hillary Clinton won, when most likely voter models had predicted that Senator Barack Obama would win, and in South Carolina Senator Obama won by a bigger margin than the likely voter models had predicted.

*Who will be the next
Democratic
Nominee for
President of the
United States?*

The pattern of unpredicted turnouts, and the resulting likely voter model failures, began in the pre-election polls for the New Hampshire primary elections, which were held on an unseasonably warm, exceptionally nice, spring-like day in January. The likely voter models for the Republican primary performed well, the pre-election polls predicted Senator John McCain to win by 3-4% and he won by about 5.5%. The likely voter model for the Democratic primary performed poorly, however, with the pre-election polls predicting an 8-9% victory by Senator Obama though Senator Clinton won by about 2.5%. The pre-election estimates for the Republican candidates were derived from models that were (presumably) based on the 2000 Republican presidential primary. For both Republican primaries, the voter turnout was remarkably similar (238,606 in 2000 and 238,909 in 2008), so the pre-election polls’ likely voter model worked well, and their predictions were reasonably accurate.

The voter turnout for the Democratic primary, on the other hand, was unprecedented in at least two ways: the number of participants and the proportion of registered Democrats who showed up to vote. In the 2004 Democratic primary, a (then) record of 219,787 voters turned out to vote—the previous record for the Democratic primary was in 1992, when 167, 819 voters participated. This year, a record shattering 287,849 voters participated in the New Hampshire Democratic primary—including nearly two thirds (66.3%) of the state’s registered Democrats (up from 43.3% in 2004), and these voted disproportionately for Senator Clinton.

The January primary elections for South Carolina displayed a somewhat similar, predictable and unpredictable pattern of voter turnout. For the Republican party, their January 19 primary was accompanied by cold, wintry weather and had a voter turnout of about 432,000 voters—somewhat below the predicted turnout of 490,000, but not unreasonable, given the weather. The likely voter models for the pre-election polls also worked quite well; the average of the pre-election polls indicated that Senator McCain would win by about 3% over Governor Mike Huckabee, and Senator McCain won by about 3% over Governor Huckabee.

The Democratic primary election, held one week later and with nicer weather, once again thwarted the pre-election pollsters' likely voter models, and did so because of the unpredicted high level of voter turnout. The Democratic turnout simply shattered all previous primary records—more than 550,000 voters turned out to participate, nearly doubling the 292,383 voters who participated in the previous record Democratic presidential primary of 2000. And, like with the New Hampshire Democratic primary, the pre-election polls were incorrect in their predictions; the pre-election polls had predicted an Obama win of about 10%, while Senator Obama won by 29%. This time, African-American voters turned out in record numbers (55% of the election day vote were African-Americans) and they supported Senator Obama.

Simply stated, the 2008 New Hampshire and South Carolina Democratic primaries had voter turnout rates that resembled a November presidential election, rather than usual party primary elections. In the early primaries, polling organizations—like everyone else—underestimated the record breaking turnouts that the Democratic party has seen thus far in the season. So instead of accurately predicting the early Democratic primary outcomes, the pre-election pollsters used expectations based on previous, more typical, primaries and this time the likely voter models simply did not work. In adjusting their expectations in light of the record levels of interest and turnout for the Democrats, the pre-election pollsters' predictions have become more accurate.

Allan is the Donald O. Clifton Chair of Survey Science, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is serving as Senior Statistical Director with Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International for the National Election Pool in the 2008 U.S. election season. He is General Secretary and newly-elected Secretary/Treasurer of WAPOR.

Call for Helen Dinerman Award Nominations

The WAPOR Helen Dinerman Award is presented annually in memory of Helen Dinerman's scientific achievements over three decades of public opinion research. The award, given since 1981, honors particularly significant contributions to survey research methodology. This is a career award recognizing a lifetime of service to the profession and the discipline.

Recent winners include: Don Dillman, Roger Jowell, Sidney Verba, Phillip Converse, Roger Tourangeau, Mahar Mangahas, Seymour Martin Lipset, Hans Zetterberg, Robert Merton and Bob Worcester. Last year in Berlin, the award was presented to Wolfgang Donsbach of Technische Universität Dresden (Germany) for his lifetime achievements.

Please send suggestions and a few lines of justification by email to WAPOR at renae@wapor.org by **April 1**. The winner will be announced at the WAPOR Annual Conference this May in New Orleans, following the decision by three past Presidents of WAPOR.

61st ANNUAL CONFERENCE: “Polls for the Public Good” New Orleans, Louisiana, USA

A joint meeting with the American Association for Public Opinion Research
WAPOR: Tuesday, May 13 to Thursday, May 15, 2008
AAPOR: Thursday, May 15 to Sunday, May 18, 2008

Pippa Norris to Lead Panel on Cross-National Surveys

Pippa Norris, the Paul F. McGuire Lecturer in Comparative Politics, is a political scientist who focuses on democracy and development, public opinion and elections, political communications, and gender politics. She has recently returned from serving as the Director of Democratic Governance at the United Nations Development Program in New York. WAPOR is proud to announce that Dr. Norris will be our keynote speaker at the upcoming annual conference as she leads a panel discussion on “*The expansion of cross-national surveys: New opportunities, new challenges.*”

Conference, registration, hotel and program information is posted on our website <http://www.wapor.org>. You can find information about New Orleans, find a link to make your hotel reservations and check the most up-to-date program information. AAPOR will be handling conference registrations. More information can be found at <http://www.aapor.org>.

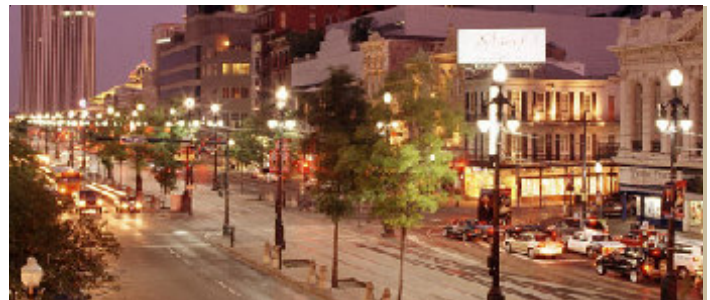
Call for Papers for Nelson and Turner Prizes

Every year at the WAPOR annual conference, accepted papers are eligible for various prizes that WAPOR awards for excellence. If you have had a paper accepted for presentation at the upcoming annual conference in New Orleans, please see the following prize announcements:

The Elizabeth **Nelson Prize** is presented to the best conference paper from a society in transition. The winner of the Nelson Prize will be presented with a certificate and \$500 at the award banquet on the 14th of May in New Orleans.

The Naomi C. **Turner Prize** honors the best conference paper presented by a student. The winner of the Turner Prize will be presented with a certificate and \$300 at the award banquet on the 14th of May in New Orleans.

If you would like to have your paper considered for either (or both) of these prizes, please submit your full paper to the WAPOR office by April 1, 2008. Your submission should be sent to Renaee@wapor.org. If you have any questions regarding eligibility, please contact the WAPOR office.



Canal Street, New Orleans

Calendar

March 21, 2008

Abstract submission deadline
WAPOR Thematical Seminar
Cadenabbia, Lake Como, Italy

April 1, 2008

Paper submission deadline to be considered
for the Nelson or Turner Prizes

April 15, 2008

Paper submission deadline for all papers
being presented at the Annual Conference

April 21, 2008

Deadline to make hotel reservations at the
Sheraton New Orleans Hotel

April 21, 2008

Deadline for pre-registration for the
conference
(registrations after this date will be charged a
late registration fee)

May 13-15, 2008

WAPOR Annual Conference
Polls for the Public Good
New Orleans, Louisiana, USA

July 10-12, 2008

WAPOR Thematical Seminar
Quality Criteria in Survey Research VII
Villa la Collina
Cadenabbia, Lake Como, Italy

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Notes

- Second renewal notices for 2008 dues were sent out recently. If you have received a notice, please take a moment to review your information and renew your dues today. Final renewal notices will be mailed in April.
- If you have moved or changed jobs recently, please check our online membership directory (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 to update the directory.
- Remember to make hotel reservations for New Orleans as soon as possible. We have contracted for a set number of rooms that are based on availability.
- Also, don't forget to register for Cadenabbia as soon as possible since space at the Villa La Collina tends to fill up quickly.

Thank you!

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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 or to Nick Moon (Publications Chair) at nmoon@gfk.com.

Let us know your upcoming events.

*Please note, the deadline date for the
1st quarter newsletter is
April 15, 2008*

Quality Criteria in Survey Research VII
A WAPOR Thematic Seminar

July 10 – 12, 2008, Villa La Collina, Cadenabbia,
 Lake Como, Italy

REGISTRATION

Name _____

Organization/Institute _____

Address: _____

Country: _____ Email: _____

Telephone: _____ Fax: _____
country city local country city local

	Price per person	Number of persons	Total
• Participation in the seminar, including accommodations and meals, for WAPOR members	\$530	_____	\$_____
• Participation in the seminar, including accommodations and meals, for nonmembers	\$630	_____	\$_____
• Accompanying persons: accommodations and meals only	\$380	_____	\$_____
• Extra day: departure on July 13, 2008	\$200	_____	\$_____
TOTAL AMOUNT			\$_____

When you register, your hotel accommodations will be arranged at either the Villa La Collina or another 3-star lakeside hotel. The price is the same for both hotels and includes all meals, with breakfast at participant's place of accommodation and lunch and dinner in the conference building, as well as the get-together on July 10. Participants will receive detailed information about the accommodations and ground transportation needs after registering.

Method of payment:

MasterCard or VISA number _____

Expiration Date: _____ Signature _____

_____ Check enclosed (please, no Eurocheques)

Please return to:

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