REMARKS TO AAPOR ANNUAL CONFERENCE MAY 19, 2012

As an AAPOR old-timer, I truly appreciate this honor and recognition.

AAPOR has grown considerably from my days as a young member. Back then I remember looking forward to hearing what the honorees of those times had to say about future opportunities for our profession.

In my brief remarks tonight, I want to stay with that tradition by flagging what I regard as a unique (if difficult) opportunity for our field.

The opportunity is to enhance the quality of American public opinion, as distinct from simply measuring it. The public needs an enormous amount of help to make the transition from raw opinion to wise and thoughtful public judgment on the complex, emotion-laden issues of our times.

This is a challenge that engaged the early pioneers of public opinion research, like Hadley Cantril, George Gallup and Elmo Roper. Today, the Deliberative Democracy Movement is vigorously pursuing that challenge.

Ordinarily, one would expect our major social/political institutions such as the communications media, elected political officials, economists and scientists to undertake this important mission. But in today's polarized nation, we are suffering a major defeat in this indispensable function of democracy.

I realize that it is a lot to ask of a profession dedicated to reflecting public opinion, not to influencing it. But I think we have a unique window on how public opinion is formed, how it changes over time, and how long it often takes to bring the public to thoughtful judgment. We enjoy an understanding of these realities of public opinion that the media, for example, lack so badly that they often distort public opinion rather than enlighten it.

I have come to the conclusion that if we don't do the job, no one will.

It is a noble challenge, and my hope is to survive long enough to see it prosper.

Thank you.

Daniel Yankelovich

2012 AAPOR Award Winner