

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

A PROPOSAL FOR A NEW ROLE AND NEW VOICE FOR AAPOR

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For the past 3 years, AAPOR has been trying to reinvent itself—to have more impact in the larger world of politics and policy, to enhance the valued diversity of our membership, and to improve the services and opportunities we offer through our publications and conference. We are making progress. Since 1994, each executive council has taken several steps toward achieving these goals, and slowly we are seeing AAPOR change.

In my view, the most controversial piece of AAPOR's reinvention, and the most difficult to achieve, has been to make AAPOR a voice of authority in debates about public opinion on policy issues. How can we do this without threatening important segments of the polling community? Should we even try to do this? Will anyone listen to us if we try?

I think we should try, and I think we can make our voice heard. I think this because AAPOR has a unique kind of authority that derives from the breadth of our membership. We represent, and have always represented, both scholars and practitioners. Our members are the people who work to advance the theory and practice of opinion research and who apply this knowledge to a wide array of real-world problems. No other organization is positioned in this way.

Yet, AAPOR has usually relied on other voices to speak out about the principles and values we hold dear. We are fortunate to have members who comment as individuals when public opinion data are used inappropriately, but critical commentary is still too rare.

AAPOR has encouraged the education of journalists so they could distinguish between carefully designed and executed polls and polls of questionable quality. We hoped a critical mass of knowledgeable reporters would either prevent poor research from being used at all in public policy debates, or at least ensure that the flaws of such research would be exposed and made part of the debate.

Certainly, there are many journalists among our members who are adept at this, and we are grateful for their careful work. We also owe a debt of

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gratitude to several journalists who are not members but who have spoken out forcefully and effectively on issues important to us—issues such as the unethical practice of push polling in political campaigns and the misguided practice of using focus-group results to generalize about public opinion. In fact, it was a journalist, Frank Greve of the Knight-Ridder chain of newspapers, who first revealed the essential issues in the standards case we resolved this year. It was Greve's aggressive questioning of Frank Luntz about the methodology of his polls in the 1994 congressional campaign that framed the ethical issues that would become central to AAPOR's consideration of this case.

In my view, the voices of our individual members and of knowledgeable reporters are not enough. The use of public opinion research in debates about policy and legislation has been exploding for decades, and it is not well examined. AAPOR could play a vital role, but how? How can we speak out as an organization on issues of data quality and the use of opinion research without exacerbating the tremendous tension surrounding the issue of standards that has always existed in AAPOR?

My answer is to start with the principles we agree on already, take a modest step in a new direction, and then see how it works and where it leads us next.

Before I make my proposal, let me briefly review, especially for our new members, the nature of the tension about standards in AAPOR. I base my review on material Tom Smith assembled and shared with me and on the AAPOR history edited by Paul Sheatsley and Warren Mitofsky (Sheatsley and Mitofsky 1992), in particular the chapters written by Sheatsley on the founding of AAPOR, by Sidney Hollander on standards, by Kathy Frankovic on AAPOR and the polls, and by Al Gollin on AAPOR and the media.

In a nutshell, we think research standards are vitally important, but we have never been able to agree on standards of performance, that is, standards about how research should be conducted. In fact, it seems that whenever we talk about performance standards, tempers flare and AAPOR threatens to break apart.

A concern about research standards appears to have been one of the central factors leading to the creation of AAPOR. A committee on standards was formed at the Central City conference in 1946, even before the founding of AAPOR, and it was this standards committee that drafted the new organization's constitution. A look at the differences between the first and subsequent drafts of AAPOR's constitution shows just how sensitive an issue standards was in the early days.

For example, the original version of the constitution listed one purpose of AAPOR as "to facilitate the dissemination and critical appraisal of opinion research methods, techniques and findings." The second version dropped the phrase "and critical appraisal" to limit this purpose only to

dissemination. Another purpose, “to promote the proper utilization of public opinion research as an effective democratic policy-forming instrument,” was edited to remove the word “proper,” signaling the founders’ reluctance to pass judgement on how research should be used.

It took until 1960 for AAPOR to adopt a code of ethics, until 1967 to adopt the standards of disclosure, and until 1975 to adopt the procedures for dealing with alleged code violations. Despite this long and sometimes torturous development, Hollander notes that “the Standards battleground was to become one of conduct, not of technique; future committees would adjudicate ethics, not performance” (p. 67). Stating the matter in a somewhat different way, Warren Mitofsky, in his 1989 presidential speech, complained that “AAPOR still has no unambiguous mechanism in its Code of Professional Ethics and Practices for condemning polls that are outright garbage, let alone so-called legitimate work that cuts corners and lacks scientific rigor” (p. 447).

Another indicator of the tension over standards lies in AAPOR’s record of adjudicating and publicizing standards cases. This year, the Council took what seems to be an unprecedented action in our history. After considerable work by Eleanor Singer, Dick Kulka, and a committee of anonymous reviewers, the Council found that an ethics violation had occurred and chose to publicize this finding widely. In the past, AAPOR’s actions in standards cases have been the following:

- It has investigated standards cases and presented its investigations as case studies to the membership without making a determination about whether the code was violated;
- It has dropped a case in the face of a threatened lawsuit and the inadequate legal protection of Council members;
- It has dropped a case after receiving an apology from the researcher.

Only one other case in our history, in 1975, was publicized widely through an AAPOR press release, and in this case AAPOR’s message was mixed. On the one hand, the evaluation committee issued a 13-page document that concluded the questionnaire used in the study at issue was “probably biased” and found “some interpretations which do not appear to be supported by the data made public” (Hollander 1992, p. 78). On the other hand, the press release noted that the company under investigation had not violated the ethics code, because it was “in complete conformity with AAPOR’s standards of disclosure.” It also noted that one Council member held a dissenting opinion about the case. In the only other case where a clear code violation was found, in 1991, the finding was publicized only in the *AAPORNews* (1991).

AAPOR has found code violations only infrequently, but this is not because public opinion research is uniformly excellent and in compliance with our code. Instead, it is because our code ignores issues of survey

quality, and, despite this narrow focus, standards cases are difficult to initiate, pursue, and resolve.

The member survey conducted last year gives some indication of what we collectively think about these issues, and I think the message is clear that members want AAPOR to move in a new direction:

Seventy-two percent of members think it is very important for AAPOR to have a code of ethics, and 59 percent think there should be enforcement of the code.

But only 5 percent think AAPOR does very well in effectively enforcing its standards.

Members seem to want a stronger voice for AAPOR. Eighty-seven percent agree that AAPOR should become more vocal in the mass media on issues relevant to the public opinion profession, and 49 percent strongly agree with this statement.

Seventy-nine percent agree, 38 percent strongly, that AAPOR should take on controversial issues, pursuing public stances on ethics in practice, on policy, and in other areas.

What I want to propose today is, I hope, a way for AAPOR to establish a stronger public voice and move in the direction of greater outspokenness on polling issues in a way that minimizes the tensions that have kept us from speaking out in the past.

My proposal has four elements:

1. That AAPOR begin to systematically monitor the use of public opinion research in debates about national public policy and legislation.
2. That AAPOR collect information about the methodology used in this public opinion research and keep track of it over time.
3. That AAPOR take action to stop the use of undocumented research in debates on public issues.
4. That AAPOR regularly analyze the record of the public use of opinion data that it assembles and report its analyses to the membership.

I propose that we limit ourselves, at least at the outset, to monitoring the use of opinion data about political and policy issues at the national level. I think we should do this for three reasons. One is to make the task more manageable. The second is to make sure our efforts have the greatest possible impact. The third is that this particular use of public opinion research is at the heart of our existence as an organization. The potential for public opinion research to enhance the democratic process inspired the founders of AAPOR, as I believe it inspires us all as individual researchers today.

Let me describe my proposal in more detail. Its first element is for

AAPOR to start a new enterprise—to monitor systematically the use of public opinion research in public debate. As far as I know, there is no individual or organization that does this now. The Roper Center at the University of Connecticut archives a tremendous amount of public opinion data, including most of the polls conducted by the major polling firms and almost all of the polls conducted for media organizations. But, the Roper Center depends on the voluntary contribution of poll results by the organizations themselves and does not attempt, nor is it meant, to create a complete record of all public polls. So, while the Roper Center's holdings are considerable and extremely valuable for secondary research, they are incomplete, particularly with respect to polls conducted for interest groups.

The system I propose would not canvass polling organizations for data. Rather, it would canvass media and legislative sources for signs of the use of data and use these signs as the starting point for further information gathering. AAPOR can make use of readily available technology to make this an easy task. We can use Lexis/Nexis and other searchable electronic data bases of newspaper articles, and radio and television transcripts to locate the use of public opinion data in news reports about policy issues. There is a World Wide Web site for the Congressional Record, which is updated every day, is free, and is searchable. We can use this to locate the use of public opinion data in legislative debate and public hearings. The technological means exist to create a fairly comprehensive record of how public opinion data are being discussed in national debates on policy at the same time the debates themselves are taking place.

Of course, as remarkable as the information-retrieval technology is, it is not automatic. Decisions must be made about the media sources to search and the parameters for the search, that is, the words and phrases that we will use as flags to opinion data in action. A team of research assistants will need to be assembled to evaluate the results of the search and to remove the irrelevant instances and the cases where no public opinion data are cited or the data do not speak to an issue of national policy or legislation. Finally, a system for keeping track of the relevant cases will need to be designed so the cases can be analyzed.

The second element of my proposal is that AAPOR collect information about the methodology used in this public opinion research and keep track of it over time. AAPOR will need a mechanism for identifying and contacting researchers to gather the basic methodological information about how their research was conducted—What was the sample design? How was the sample implemented? What questions were asked? Who sponsored the study?

At a minimum, we will want to collect data about the methodological information contained in our own standards of disclosure. But I think we should go even further and collect information that would allow us to see

the extent to which AAPOR's new statement on best practices of public opinion research actually describes current practice. For example, our new document encourages the use of pretesting, yet we have no idea how common it is for questionnaires about policy issues to be pretested. If we adopt this monitoring effort, we could find out.

To create a monitoring program like this will require considerable work on the part of the Council, or on the part of a committee appointed by the Council. We are lucky in AAPOR to have many talented and hard-working people who might be called on to help with this task. But to actually implement such a program will require money: money for research assistance, for equipment, and for a subscription to Lexis/Nexis. I think it is possible for AAPOR to raise this money. We were able to help raise foundation money once this year for another project, and I am sure could do it again.

The third element of my proposal is for AAPOR to take action to stop the use of undocumented research in debates on public issues. In other words, I want AAPOR to speak out forcefully on behalf of our standards of disclosure. Why only disclosure? So far, it is the only thing on which all of us in AAPOR can agree.

How can we do this? How can we speak out forcefully on behalf of our standards of disclosure? One way would be to use our established procedures for dealing with alleged violations of our code of professional ethics and practices. Failing to disclose minimal details about research methodology when results are made public is a violation of the code. Our experience this year with the Frank Luntz case demonstrates that we can use our procedures effectively to identify, resolve, and publicize this type of violation.

The problem is that the process takes a long time. AAPOR finally made a public statement about Luntz's failure to disclose the details of his research about the Republican's Contract with America more than 2½ years after Luntz talked about his research results publicly.

We have since taken steps to streamline our procedures. But even under the new procedures the swiftest case receiving the full and immediate attention of the Council could probably not be resolved in less than 3 months, and most cases would still take about a year to resolve.

A second, and more immediate, type of action would be for AAPOR to issue press releases routinely whenever we are unable to secure essential information about a particular poll's methodology, after repeatedly and dutifully trying to get it. I suspect most researchers, faced with an AAPOR request for additional methodological information about their research, would be responsive in some way. But any researcher who is wholly unresponsive yet allows his or her data to be used in a public debate should not be allowed to get away with it. A public statement from AAPOR about an individual researcher's failure to disclose would send this message. It

would also provide an opportunity for AAPOR to further educate the press and the public about why we think this disclosure is important.

The value of these public statements is they would help create a more widespread understanding that poll results can be evaluated and accepted only after a consideration of some specific facts about how the poll was done. They would create the expectation among researchers that someone will pay attention to the methodological details of their work if it is reported publicly. In other words, routine inquiries by AAPOR may make this information more accessible, whereas now it is often difficult to assemble after a poll has been released. More important, this expectation might be enough to cause a researcher to think twice about making policy arguments on the basis of private data—one of the very practices we are trying to stop.

The fourth element of my proposal is to examine regularly the record of the public use of opinion data and to report these analyses to the membership. I also think these data should be made available to individual AAPOR members with an interest in analyzing them further—they might be an important resource for our members.

Perhaps a session at each conference could be devoted to the discussion of the polling methodology used to create the data cited in the years' policy debates—How much variation was there in sampling methodology? What was the range of reported response rates? What type of respondent selection procedures were used?

By confronting these data on a regular basis, the record might provide an impetus for expanding AAPOR's own public role beyond the proposal I'm making today. Phil Meyer once said that the purpose of the code of ethics is not so much to punish evildoers as it is to sharpen our consciousness about our professional values, to allow us, or require us, to think about our principles more clearly when forced to apply them in real cases. I agree with this, and think it is time for us to start the hard work of looking at the real cases.

I think an explicit consideration of the record might help us generate the will and the consensus to do what we have not yet been able to do collectively—to speak out with authority about the quality of research that is used to influence or inform debates on public issues.

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