



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

Are We Ready for Change?

Public Opinion Research in the 2008 Presidential Election

By Weiwu Zhang
Conference Chair

By any measure, the 2008 presidential election will be a watershed event. It marks the first time since the 1928 election in which neither an incumbent president nor an incumbent vice president is running for their party's nomination. By April, all remaining candidates are sitting U.S. senators. It appears almost certain that a sitting senator will be elected President of the United States this year. As of this writing, Sen. Clinton and Sen. Obama are continuing their slugfest for the Democratic nomination while Sen. McCain is already the presumptive Republican nominee. Whatever happens, for the first time in U.S. history, America may elect the first black president, the first woman president, or the most senior president. A looming economic recession, the war in Iraq and a public clamor for genuine change in Washington have created a political environment filled with enormous challenges and opportunities for public opinion researchers.

This year's conference theme is "Are We Ready for Change? Public Opinion Research in the 2008 Presidential Election." This "change" theme can be interpreted in many ways. The following questions are suggestions intended to generate thoughts on possible research topics:

What constitutes "change"? Methodologically, how do we conceptualize and measure various changes of public opinion in this election? What changes were there in how public opinion was measured in the 2008 campaign?

How do public opinion polls and online polling fare in predicting the outcome? Why did almost every poll predict a big win for Sen. Obama in the New Hampshire primary but Sen. Clinton scored an upset victory?

How do media cover the election campaign? Has type of coverage changed in this election over previous ones? Are media biased against Clinton, Obama, or McCain? What are the possible effects of SNL and other late night shows?

How do media cover the presidential debates? How has debate coverage changed this election from previous ones? The debate in Philadelphia moderated by ABC's Charlie Gibson and George Stephanopoulos before the Pennsylvania primary was widely criticized for its focus on candidate gaffes and trivial matters instead of candidate policy differences, or were they legitimate questions that matter to the voters?

To what extent do media give the public the kind of coverage they want and to what extent do they shape the public's wants?

How do social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, or MySpace influence public opinion?

To what extent do voters practice the hostile media phenomenon? In other words, strong partisans perceive media coverage biased toward the opponent of their favored candidates.

How do we assess the influence of various new media forms such as politically oriented web sites, blogs, chatrooms or instant messaging? Do new media serve as the marketplace for exchanging different views or merely as

communication "ghettos" where people practice selective exposure?

Do voters go to different political web sites or blogs because they care about different issues (the issue public hypothesis) or because they have different level of political interest in that political news junkies go to a variety of online information sources and the politically apathetic use few sources (the attentive public hypothesis)?

How is online interaction regarding the election different from or similar to offline interaction?

The close race between Clinton and Obama for the Democratic nomination has stimulated a lot of excitement and brought many new voters into the democratic process, especially young college students. Do these young voters differ substantially from traditional voters?

To what extent is the infighting between the Democratic candidates hurting or helping the party in the general election? How can McCain be beating the Democratic candidates in opinion polls despite his association with the increasingly unpopular president?

And where do voters get their news? Are they pure receivers of news or are they "citizen journalists" who are witnesses to news in the making?

MAPOR welcomes research proposals addressing any aspect of the conference theme or other topics relevant to public opinion research, theory, or methodology.

As in recent years, MAPOR encourages proposals for panels on similar topics. If you plan to propose a

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A Difficult Off-Season

By Ward Kay
MAPOR President

Usually the time from the MAPOR meeting in November until the Spring Board meeting is a quiet time. The spring board meeting kicks off the pre-conference work schedule as we come up a conference theme and develop the call for papers. However, this off season we had to deal with a couple of major issues.

I'm torn over which one to start with – the lurid one or the one with the biggest impact on the membership. I'll go the tabloid way and start with the theft.

It's a simple story. The bank decided to send as an unasked-for "perk" a corporate debit card. Unfortunately, the bank sent this debit card to the wrong address. Over the course of a long weekend, someone withdrew \$3,800 before the bank called and canceled the card. The bank assumed responsibility for their error and MAPOR's funds were replaced (about a month later). The worst part of the story is that this happened while Allen White was trying to close up the books and ship everything to his replacement as Secretary/Treasurer, Joe

Murphy. Allen did not need more drama during his tenure. The board appreciates his handling of this situation.

The second difficulty of the off-season has more long term effects. When the board received the hotel contract we were surprised to find that the contract had the wrong dates. The contract had kept the dates the same as last year, so instead of a Friday-Saturday conference, we were scheduled a Wednesday-Thursday conference. Oops!

So we changed the dates to right ones, but now there was a new problem. The hotel had scheduled another group to use the entire 13th floor on Friday. There is no place for the MAPOR luncheon. This is bad. There is not an alternative location in the hotel. We are going to have the MAPOR luncheon on Saturday.

I called the hotel to play "Let's a Make a Deal." The deal we arrived at was this: the MAPOR room allotment has been increased so that more MAPORites can get the MAPOR rate, but MAPOR will not be responsible for any costs if we don't fill the increased room allotment. Hopefully, there will be plenty of room

for us this year. However, the board is making arrangements for an overflow hotel.

The board became concerned that attendance would fall at the luncheon because of the possible competition of the Ohio State-Michigan game. Our board member from Ohio State, Chip Eveland, came up with the solution: a MAPOR Brunch. **So this year, the MAPOR luncheon will be a brunch on Saturday.** This should be a fun. We've had the same buffet for years and brunch buffets will offer us a new variety.

MAPOR, are you ready for a change?

Promote Your Books!

MAPOR would like to help authors promote their books. Please let us know if you would like to display your book at the 2008 MAPOR conference. In order to do so, publishers will need to provide one complimentary copy that will be given as a prize to a selected student attendee. For more information, contact Weiwu Zhang: weiwu.zhang@ttu.edu.

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panel, please submit your proposal along with a list of potential panelists. However, we may not be able to accommodate as many as usual given the big increase in submissions in recent years.

The conference will be on Nov. 21-22, 2008 at the Avenue Hotel (formerly Radisson Hotel & Suites), Chicago.

Please submit abstracts as electronic attachments in MS Word or PDF format via e-mail to abstracts@mapor.org. If you are unable to send attachments, send the abstract by regular mail to:

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All abstracts must be **received** no later than **5 p.m. CDT, June 30, 2008**. Please make sure that you include **e-mail addresses of all author(s)** (not just the contact author) along with your submissions. The details are on the Call for Papers.

Finally, please consider making your hotel reservations early, and plan to take advantage of the special MAPOR rate. If you make your reservations through the hotel and use the MAPOR rate, you'll help us meet our room guarantee and help us control the costs of the conference.

We are also holding our eleventh MAPOR Fellows Student Paper Contest. Each paper is thoroughly reviewed by top public opinion scholars in our field. For this competition, a "student" is someone currently enrolled in a graduate or undergraduate program. A paper authored by more than one person is a student paper if all parties are students according

to the above definition. Students need not be members of MAPOR.

The topic of the paper must conform to the general areas of scholarship that MAPOR addresses, which are (1) public opinion and (2) survey methods. The papers need not be quantitative nor must they report data in order to qualify for consideration in this competition.

Students first need to submit an abstract of their paper, conforming to the 2008 MAPOR Call for Papers (see the call for more information). Deadline for submission is **5 p.m. CDT, June 30, 2008**. Students should specify on a page accompanying the abstract that they are students. Send the submission by electronic mail to abstracts@mapor.org

Please visit MAPOR website (<http://www.mapor.org>) and the call for the Student Paper Competition for more details. I hope to see all of you at the 2008 MAPOR conference.