

Socially Controversial Topics

A Brief Tour

Jill Darling, PAPOR Conference, San Francisco 2010

Election Research Includes, From Time to Time...

- ◉ Same-sex marriage
- ◉ Legalization of marijuana
- ◉ Abortion
- ◉ Stem cell research
- ◉ Euthanasia
- ◉ Death penalty
- ◉ Immigration
- ◉ Etc.

When a Controversial Topic Becomes a Salient Wedge Issue

- Leadership directives, pronouncements, guidance
- Media / Campaign / Public events
- Community / National events

- Intensity => Enhanced cross-pressures on voters (Hillygus and Sheilds: partisan identity may conflict or mismatch with party positions)

When a Controversial Topic Becomes a Salient Wedge Issue

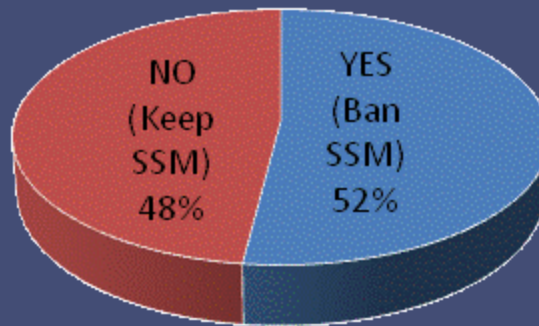
- ◉ Social desirability answering
- ◉ Discomfort or fatigue with subject (break offs, satisficing, tune-out)
- ◉ Enhanced risk of code words / loaded phrases
- ◉ Micro-demographics

Measurement Error

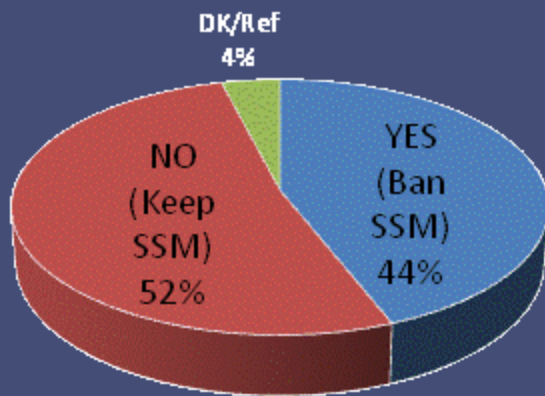
- Choice of **survey mode**
 - > Human Interviewer effects (social desirability) vs. Attrition and non-response
- **Sample** and **quota** issues
 - > Appropriate sample universe and selection
 - > Quota sampling issues
- Item and unit **non-response**
 - > Who is not responding at all, who is refusing to answer certain questions, and who is breaking off and being replaced?
- **Respondent experience**
 - > Comfort level
 - > Privacy, safety, ability to focus
 - > Able to perform the task (Is the survey mode suitable for the assessment?)
 - > Cognitive abilities, familiarity with the topic
- Question **order/ wording / phrasing**
 - > Order bias, code words, associations

An Example: PPIC Support for Same-Sex Marriage, and Prop 8

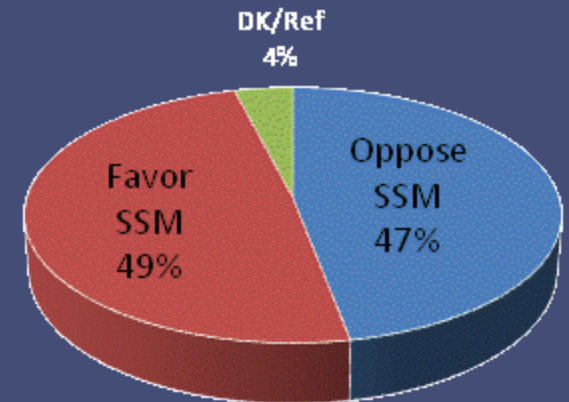
Actual Vote
November 4, 2008



PPIC Prop 8 Vote
October 2008



PPIC Favor/Oppose SSM
October 2008



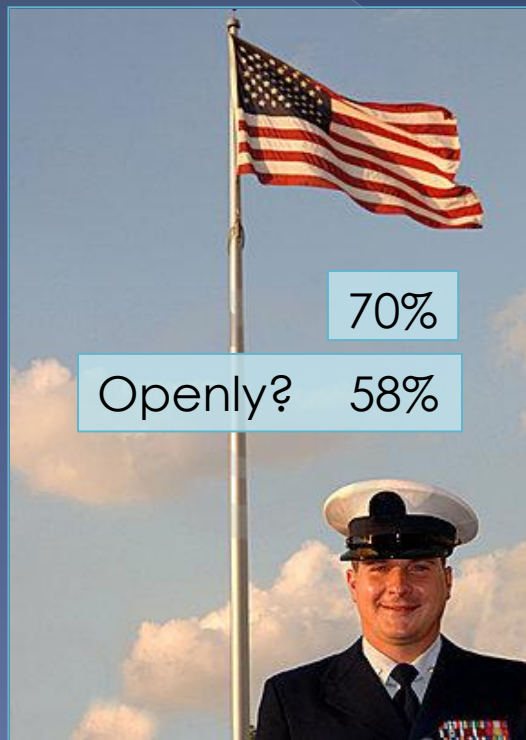
PPIC Proposition 8 Question

Proposition 8 is called the “Eliminates Right of Same-Sex Couples to Marry Initiative Constitutional Amendment.” It changes the California Constitution to eliminate the right of same-sex couples to marry. It provides that only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California. Fiscal impact over the next few years includes potential revenue loss, mainly sales taxes, totaling state and local governments. In the long run, it will likely have little fiscal impact on state and local governments. If the election were held today, would you vote yes or no on Proposition 8?

Word Associations

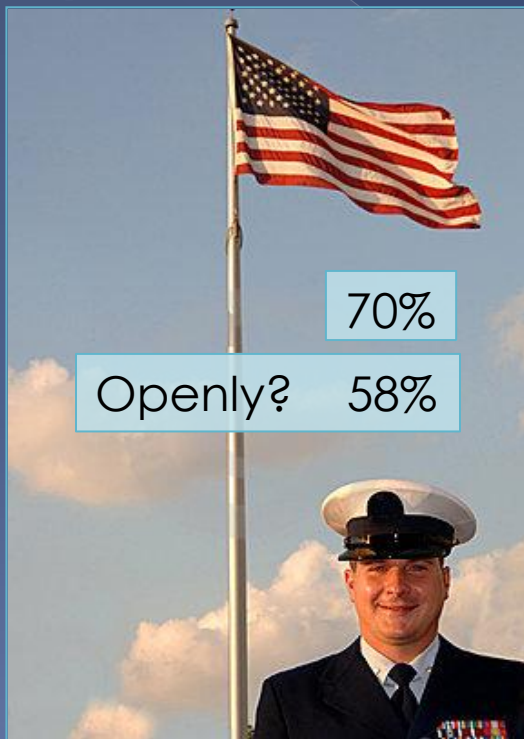
- ⦿ CBS/New York Times split sample testing of the use of “gay men and lesbians” vs. “homosexuals” allowed to serve in the military.
- ⦿ February 2010, national RDD telephone sample of 1,084 adults

Percentage favoring permitting Gay Men and Lesbians to Serve in the Military

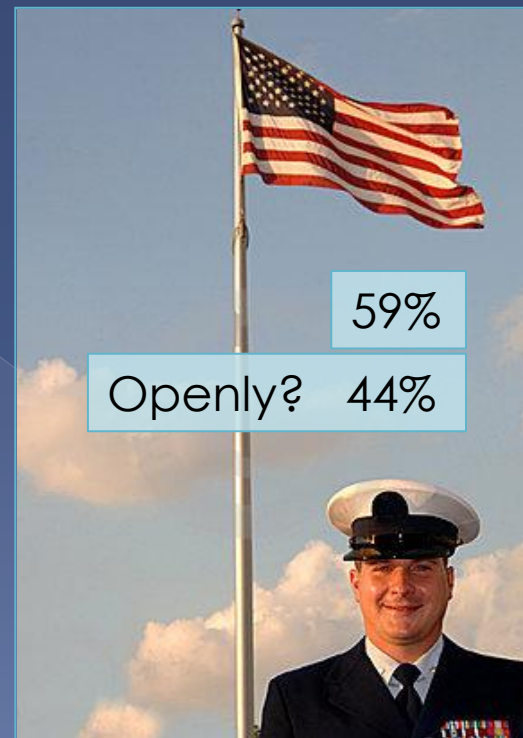


Percentage favoring permitting _____ to Serve in the Military

Gay Men and Lesbians

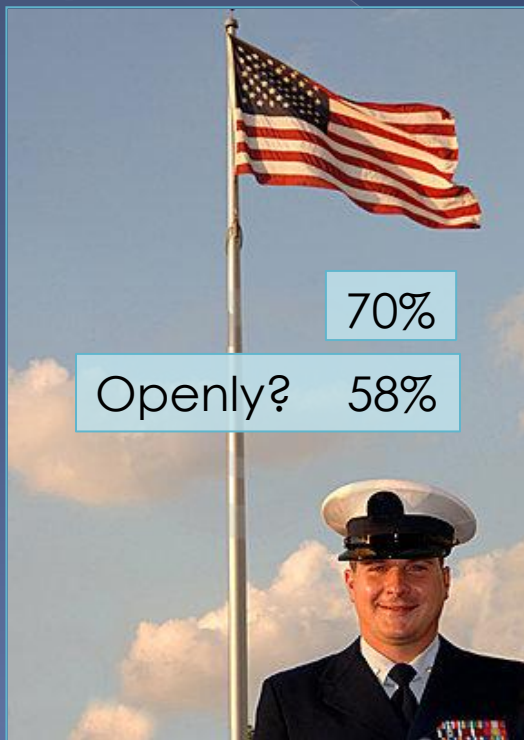


Homosexuals



What Images Spring To Mind?

Gay Men and Lesbians



Homosexuals



Because We Love Data: A Quick Look At The Results...



CBS NEWS/NEW YORK TIMES POLL
 FOR RELEASE: Thursday, February, 11, 2010
 2:00 PM EST

Question wording impacts views on this subject. When the phrase "gay men and lesbians" is used instead of "homosexuals," support for permitting them to serve in the military increases.

	FAVOR OR OPPOSE _____ SERVING IN MILITARY?	
	Homosexuals	Gay Men & Lesbians
Strongly favor	34%	51%
Somewhat favor	25	19
Somewhat oppose	10	7
Strongly oppose	19	12

There is a similar effect when it comes to whether gay people should serve openly. When referred to as "homosexuals," 44% favor allowing them to serve in the military openly. When referred to as "gay men and lesbians," that percentage rises to 58%.

	ALLOWED TO SERVE OPENLY	
	Homosexuals	Gay Men & Lesbians
Favor	44%	58%
Oppose	42	28

homosexuals to serve in
 date over allowing gay
 (presidency), but down
 rongly opposes it has

National RDD sample
 of 1,084 adults,
 interviewed by
 telephone.

Sensitive Subjects Literature Shows Definite Mode Effect e.g.

- **Villarroel et al , 2006** 1,534 US and 744 Baltimore adults 18-45 yrs old.
- National STD and Behavior Measurement Experiment testing **Telephone Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing (T-ACASI)** vs. traditional CATI
- Estimating prevalence of same-sex contact and experiences
- Found clear mode effects on reporting

Selected Villarroel Findings...

- Mode effect
 - > T-ACASI respondents were 1.5 to 1.6 times more likely to report same-gender sexual attraction, experience and genital contact as CATI respondents
 - > Mode effects were equivalent across gender, education, and race . However, effects were **NOT** equivalent for people with children, marrieds, and in traditionally lower-reporting rural locations
- Trade-off: T-ACASI higher break-off rates
 - > Break-offs called back, half blamed technical difficulties, half said they had ended the interview. Of those, 36% said it was too long and 31.5% didn't like the questions
- Inadvertent lesson in sensitivity to context
 - > Sudden **outbreak** of **CATI break-off** at "standard" question included for calibration of the study
 - > **43** CATI break-offs
 - > Only **8** T-ACASI break-offs

Other Break-Off Issues?

- Do controversial questions, or single-issue surveys cause differential break-offs? That is, are some types of respondents more likely to hang up?



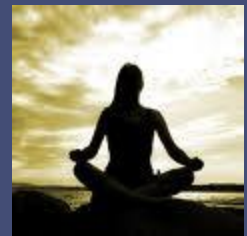
An AAPORnet quote...

A really long time ago--the mid-1980s--a firm I worked for did a 1.25 hour telephone interview on perceptions of Transcendental Meditation in advance of a trial. Most of us were surprised to find that about one in three of our respondents practiced TM.

Put another way, one in three of the respondents who stayed with the 1.25 hour survey practiced TM.

-- **J. Ann Selzer, Ph.D**

Selzer & Company

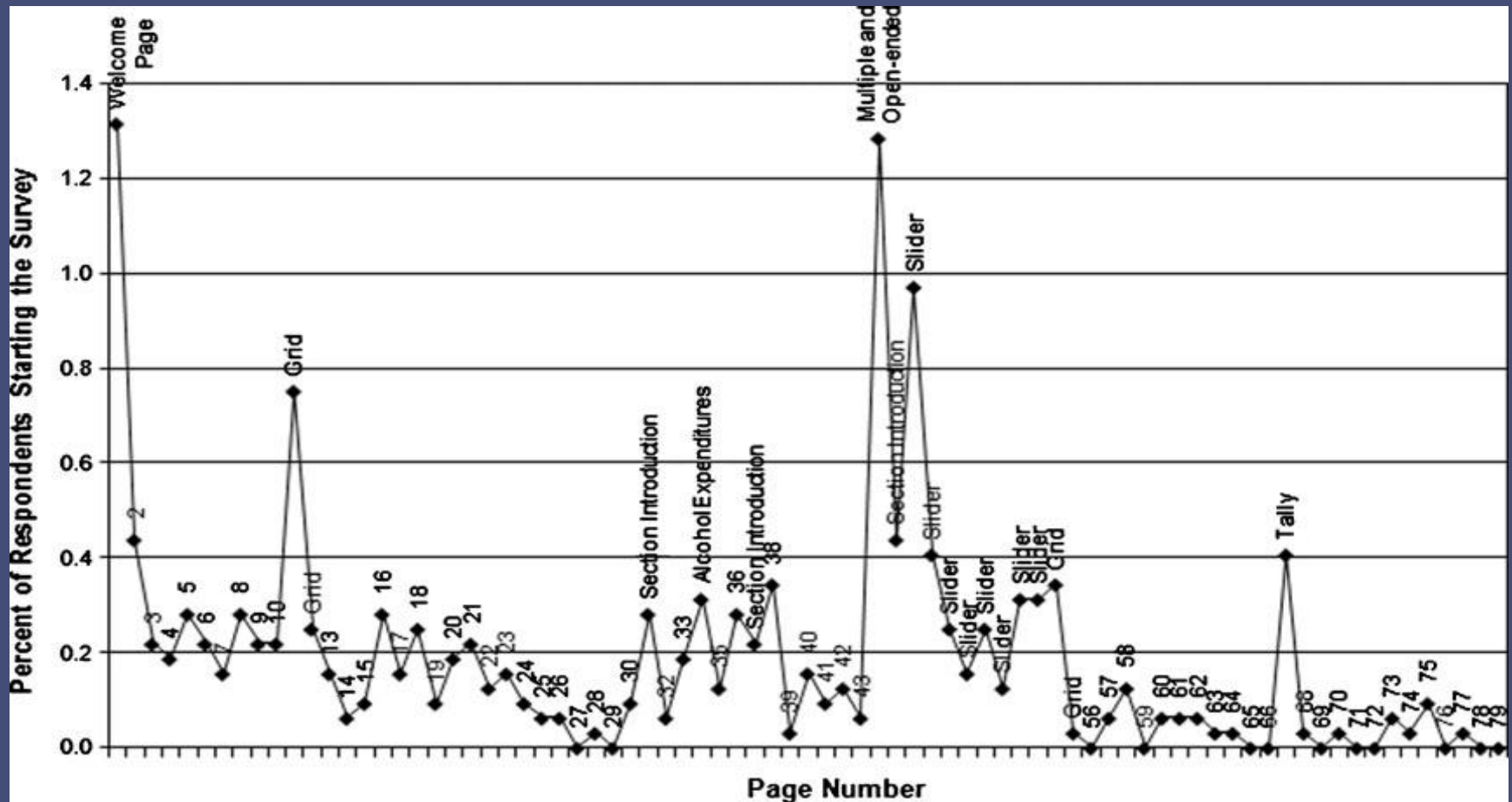


Some Work Has Been Done...

- Systematic study of possible effect on measurement error is sparse (hard to do!)
- Peytchev (2009) documented break-offs in web surveys occurred more often at:
 - > Section introductions
 - > Difficult questions
 - Long batteries, Open ends, Grids
 - Sensitive subject matter
- He also found some respondent cohort issues: lower cognitive sophistication may be a predictor of higher break-off rates



Break-off Rate, by Page, in Web Study



In Summary

- ⦿ No conclusions, mostly questions:
 - > Are issues in wedge issue research the same, overlapping, or entirely different than those studied for sensitive subjects research?
 - > If we understand one type of wedge issue, do we understand others, or is each one unique? Can they be categorized?
 - > More research is needed

Specific References

- Baldassare, Mark, Dean Bonner, Jennifer Paluch, Sonja Petek. 2008. "Public Policy Institute Statewide Survey: Californians and their Government #32."
- Villaroel, Maria, Charles F. Turner, Elizabeth Eggleston, Alia Al-Tayyib, Susan M. Rogers, Anthony M. Roman, Philip C. Cooley, Harper Gordek, 2006. "Same Gender Sex in the United States. Impact of T-ACASI on Prevalence Estimates." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70:166-96
- Peytchev , Andy. 2009. "Survey Breakoff." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73: 74-97
- Hillygus, Sunshine, Todd G. Shields. 2009. *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns*. Princeton University Press.