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**Uncovering What People Really Think—“The List Experiment”**

**Thomas I. Miller, Ph.D.**

The hardest thing for surveys to estimate is the real opinion of a person driven just to say the right thing. The tendency to say the “right” thing is greater in phone surveys than mail surveys and for sensitive questions than run-of-the-mill questions (like, Do you own a bicycle?) We all think it wrong to appear brutish, so it’s uncommon for those who may hold negative opinions of women, youth, minorities, older adults or those with disabilities to admit those negative opinions to a survey interviewer. In surveys of all kinds, more people claim to attend church, use transit and to vote than actually do.

More than 90% of surveyed Americans have reported to telephone interviewers that they would vote for a qualified woman if she ran for president. But would they? The List Experiment is one fascinating way to get at the truth. A randomly chosen group is asked to report the number of statements that make them “angry or upset,” out of four statements given. Notice, no one has to identify which statement is the source of the annoyance. Another randomly chosen group is given the same four statements with this one added, “A woman serving as president.”

The Lists Given to Randomly Equivalent Survey Groups: “How many of the following make you angry or upset?”

The way gasoline prices keep going up	The way gasoline prices keep going up
Professional athletes getting million dollar-plus salaries	Professional athletes getting million dollar-plus salaries

Enrolling in The NCS is easy. 1) You can get all the details including an enrollment form and a comprehensive calendar by visiting [icma.org/ncs](http://icma.org/ncs). 2) Once you complete the enrollment form, you send it to National Research Center, Inc along with a check for \$5,900 which is a portion of the Basic Service Fee (\$9,900). Your check initiates The NCS process. 3) You will be added to the next available class of participants, unless you specify a different Class. NRC will email a packet of information containing FAQ sheets, background information on The NCS, your timeline and a Worksheet Packet. The Worksheet Packet will guide you through the steps to customize your survey, write policy questions, and choose add-on options where needed.

For more information send us an email at [ncs@icma.org](mailto:ncs@icma.org) or call us at 202-289-ICMA. If you have specific questions about the survey or invoices, contact [damema@n-r-c.com](mailto:damera@n-r-c.com) or 303-444-7863.

**The National Citizen Survey™** (The NCS) is a cost effective system for conducting comprehensive surveys of local residents and an important benchmarking tool that allows comparison among communities. The NCS begins with a customizable survey with core questions important to your community. It comes to you from

Requiring seat belts to be used when driving	Requiring seat belts to be used when driving
Large corporations polluting the environment	Large corporations polluting the environment
	A woman serving as president.

The difference in the number of items, on average, that annoys each random group can be attributed directly to the added number of people who are annoyed by “a woman serving as president.” In a national survey conducted in March, 2006, this experiment demonstrated that 26% of Americans would be annoyed by a woman serving as president. Assuming it unlikely that one would vote for a situation they found upsetting, the simple survey estimates that over 90% of Americans would vote for a qualified woman president, is too high.

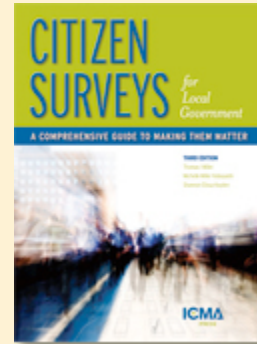
This experiment could be used to assess whether local residents would vote for a tax increase to assist people with disabilities, build a center for teens or support a senior center, as examples.

(For more see: Streb, M.J. et al, “Social Desirability Effects and Support for a Female American President.” Public Opinion Quarterly. Vol 72, No. 1, 2008, pp. 76-89.)

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National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) and ICMA.

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**Just Published!**

[Citizen Surveys for Local Government: A Comprehensive Guide to Making Them Matter](#)

**Q&A: Major Events Affect Citizen Opinion**

**Q:** What happens to citizen survey ratings when there is a big shock to a local system? Are resident opinions affected by an unanticipated event that stresses services or even may be dangerous?

**A.** The answer is, “Yes.” Recent evidence collected by researchers at National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) demonstrates that residents are paying attention to their cities and big events can undermine confidence in service delivery. Because resident opinion is strongly influenced by big shocks to stable systems, the change in resident opinion is strong evidence that the surveys that capture the shift from that shock are picking up the real change in perceptions.

**Evidence**

1. The big storm of December 2006 dumped record amounts of snow on Colorado’s Front Range, forcing closures of most main highways to and from Denver. Not only was Denver shut down, so were many of the suburban cities nearby. For days, major thoroughfares and residential streets were impassable throughout the region. NRC survey results from more than five of these jurisdictions showed average declines in ratings for snow removal of about 20% - from the mid 50%’s (ratings adding “excellent” plus “good”) to mid 30%’s in several months that followed the storm. In the next survey (one to two years later), with no intervening big snow, the rates came back to the same average level they had been prior to the storm.

2. In 2002, two snipers terrorized the Rockville, Maryland area. In 2001 and in 2003, NRC had conducted citizen surveys in which Rockville residents were asked about their feelings of safety. Our personal phone contact with our clients confirmed the ubiquitous fear that the sniper shootings inflicted on the community during their rampage. Mothers would not take their children to after-school programs; residents would not stop to fuel their cars. Between 2001 and 2003 (one year prior to and one year following the shootings) resident ratings of safety in their neighborhoods, downtown, in the daytime and at night were unchanged—demonstrating the short-lived nature of the shock.

**Conclusion**

Managers may hope that residents will continue to give strong ratings to services that are stressed by a cataclysm, but citizen surveys are not designed to capture the hard work that occurs behind the scenes when travails or tragedy occur. Citizen opinions that plummet with the development of a big problem are not built on reflection of the great job “under tough conditions” that local governments do when a record storm hits or a murderer is sought. Instead, residents report their experience of service as they experience it. Their fear or inconvenience shoots off the charts which would not have happened if the snipers were caught or the snow was conquered within moments of onset. It doesn’t matter if all the experts in the world understand that immediate resolution of such difficult circumstances is impossible. Surveys don’t test expert opinion. Surgeons might consider an operation to be without error, well planned and perfectly executed, but if the patient dies, the family concludes the procedure is a failure. So it is with the best intended response to overwhelming conditions on the streets of a city.

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**The NCS Info Corner**

Here is a calendar for new classes scheduled July through October 2009.

	<b>Enrollment Deadline</b>	<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Draft Reports</b>	<b>Completion</b>
July	July 6	Aug 24–Sep 21	October 12	November 2
August	August 3	Sep 21–Oct 19	November 9	November 30
September	August 31	Oct 19–Nov 16	December 7	December 28
October	October 5	Nov 23–Dec 21	January 11, 2010	February 1, 2010

The NCS offers classes or groups of participants beginning at the start of each month. In order to be considered for a certain class, NCS needs to receive an enrollment form and payment check approximately two weeks prior to the start date. It will consider late arrivals contingent on space available in each class. It is happy to work with an individual's schedule as much as possible.

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